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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 56, No. 3 NOVEMBER, 1954

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

WEST OF THE PECOS.....Jackson Cole 8
The trail of this gang who planned to wipe out the Rangers led the Lone Wolf far away from Texas soil

A Long Novelet

BATTLE AT FORT DIAMONDBACK.....Steuart Emery 72
In Apache country a man's past was pretty much his own business—unless the law caught up with him

Four Short Stories

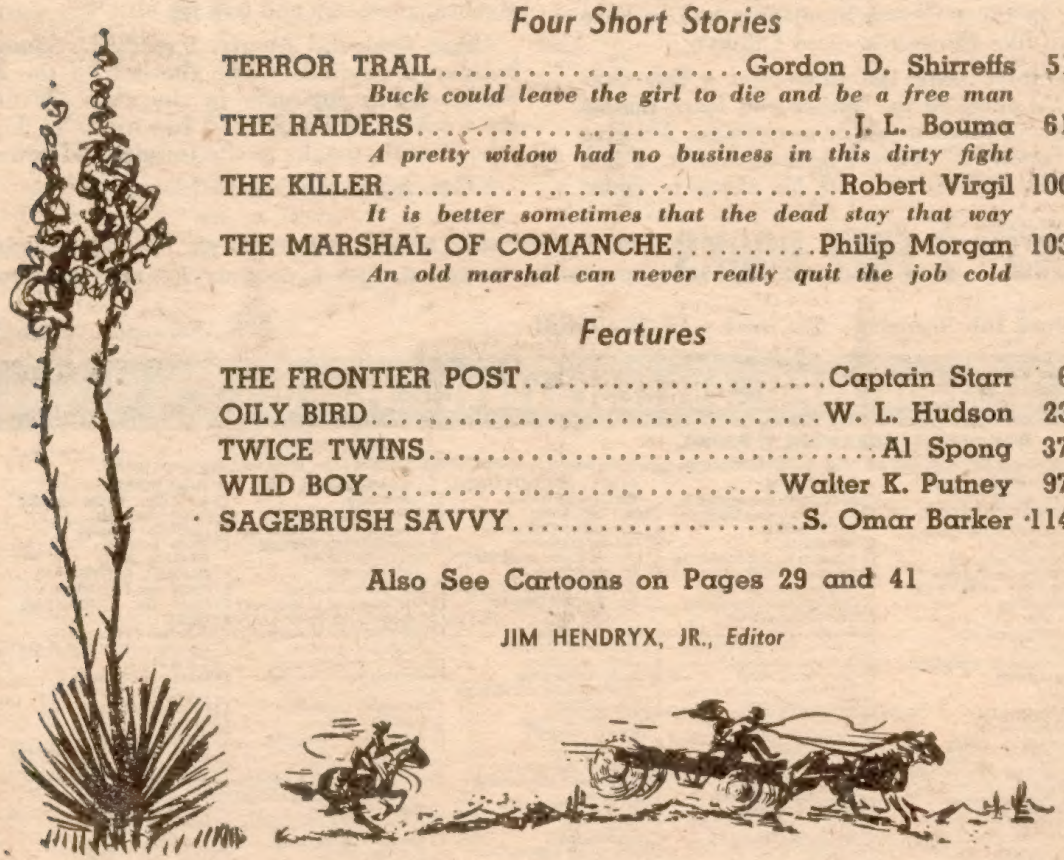
TERROR TRAIL.....Gordon D. Shirreffs 51
Buck could leave the girl to die and be a free man
THE RAIDERS.....J. L. Bouma 61
A pretty widow had no business in this dirty fight
THE KILLER.....Robert Virgil 100
It is better sometimes that the dead stay that way
THE MARSHAL OF COMANCHE.....Philip Morgan 103
An old marshal can never really quit the job cold

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
OILY BIRD.....W. L. Hudson 23
TWICE TWINS.....Al Spong 37
WILD BOY.....Walter K. Putney 97
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 114

Also See Cartoons on Pages 29 and 41

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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A "DRY" MINING camp leaves a lot to be desired and Jack Nicholson, who operated the Belleville Hotel along in 1873, realized it better than most. Water had to be freighted in at a cost of about ten cents a gallon, and although a pipeline was planned to bring water from some springs about eight miles away, Jack wanted his own regular supply of the precious stuff for his guests. Besides, Jack liked to have a water chaser along with his regular drops of the old creature.

Consequently Jack hired a crew of idle Nevada miners to sink a shaft in the hopes of striking water. Belleville took an intense interest in the project, with each dry shovelful of earth bringing sighs from the boardwalk superintendents.

Water and Whiskey

Digging had gone on for several days without success, when the crew prepared to resume work that hot July morning. The first man was given a precipitous ride down into the shaft via the windlass bucket. To the utter astonishment of the men at the top, there was a loud splash, followed by terrified yells.

"I'm drowning! I'm drowning! Pull me up! Pull!"

They quickly wound the miner back up the shaft. He was dripping wet, and still gurgling.

They'd hit water in Belleville!

Loafers and workers alike rushed to the well while all work stopped in Belleville. Jack Nicholson was justly proud, and immediately announced:

"The bar is open men. The drinks are on me. We have to celebrate this right proper-like."

Even as interested as the Belleville residents were in the water, they were even more fond of whiskey. Jack's bartenders dispensed redeye with a free hand, and empty whiskey barrels began to mount outside. It was the biggest celebration ever held in Belleville.

Transfusions could have been given directly from the bloodshot eyes of the men in Belleville the next morning, but even with busting heads and quavering stomachs, they wandered back to the site of the well.

The well was dry; all of the water had seeped away in the night!

Joke on Jack

The well diggers quickly swung down the shaft and began to dig, but no water spouted up. Jack Nicholson was called, but he had no explanation. He ordered the men to continue digging.

After he'd left, someone, history doesn't say who, suggested the miners knock off, or at least take it easy. There was no water; never had been.

During the night previous to the discovery of water in Jack's well, a small group of jokers had bought up all available water coming into town, and had dumped it in

the hole, knowing full well Jack would celebrate and set up the drinks, and they'd be among the revelers.

Perhaps the water cost them more than the whiskey would have ordinarily, but think of all the fun they'd had laughing at Jack's well.

And it was probably the only time in history that a dry well produced drinks for everyone in town.

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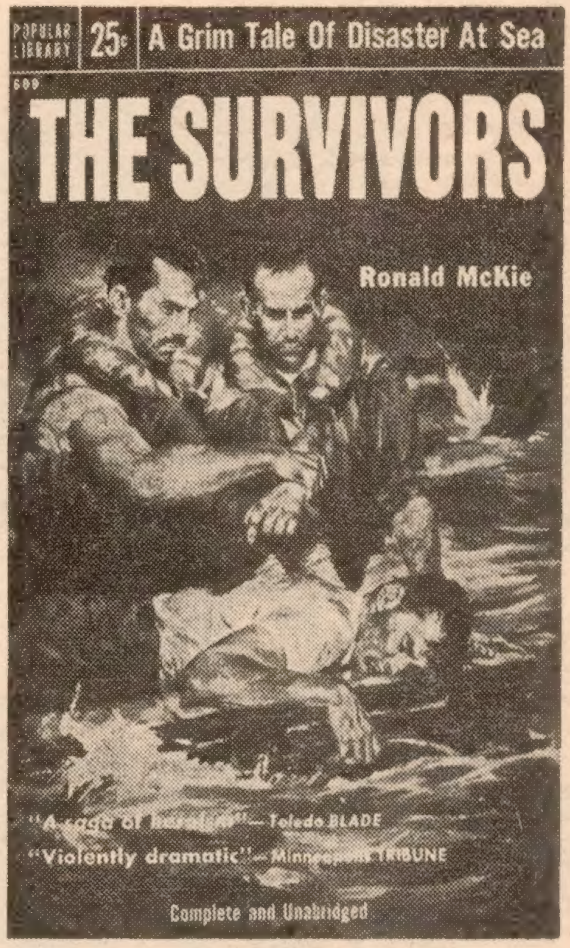

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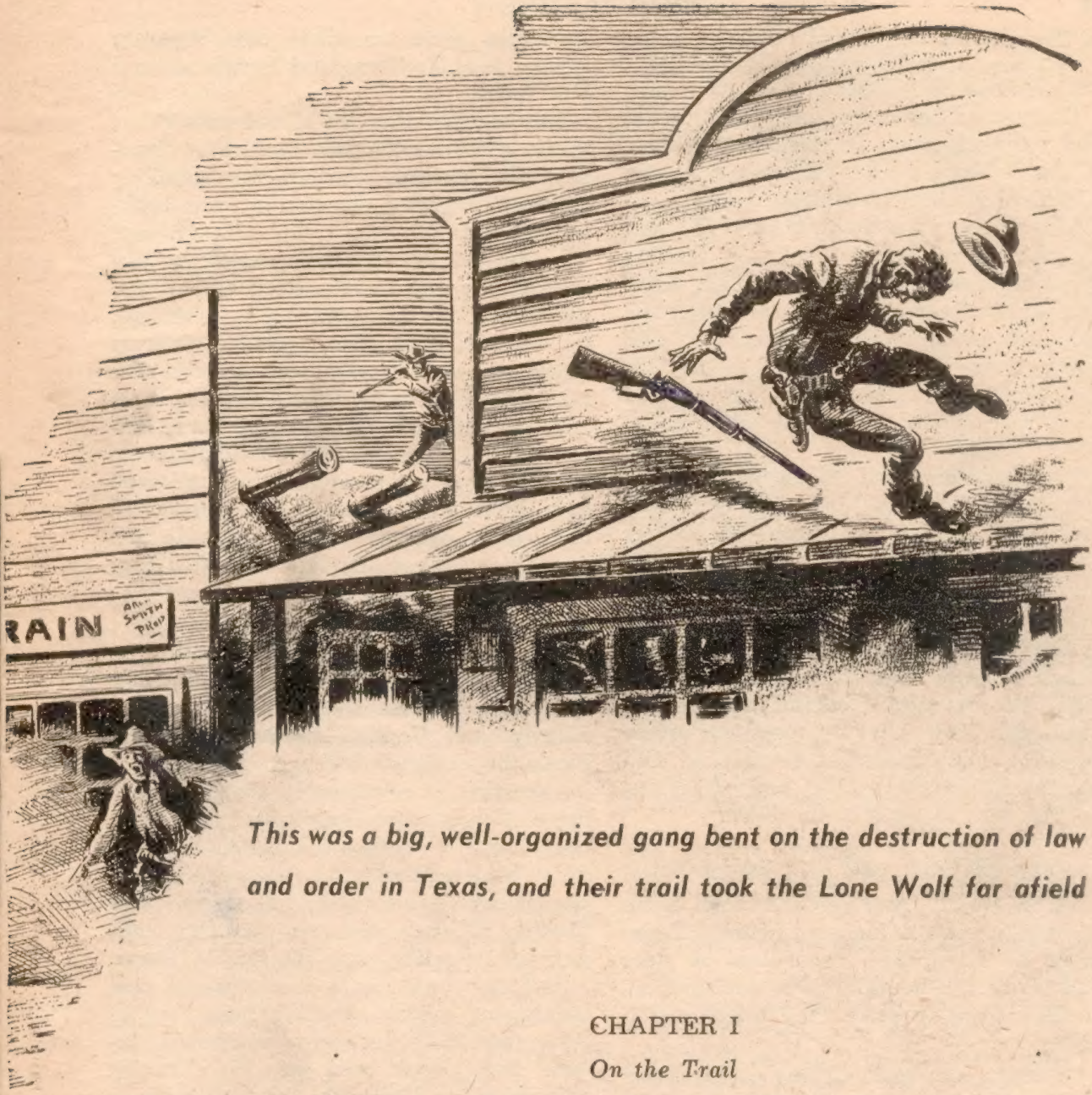
West of the Pecos

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE



This was a big, well-organized gang bent on the destruction of law and order in Texas, and their trail took the Lone Wolf far afield

CHAPTER I

On the Trail

THE trace led westward across the Llano Estacado and into New Mexico Territory. Back on the Staked Plains the quarry had split up into four pairs, and the four Rangers in pursuit had separated to follow the divergent tracks. But one of them, Jim Hatfield, was sure they would all wind up in Lincoln County, because that was where the strange appeals and warnings had come from to Rangers headquarters.

Fugitive Texas outlaws were overrunning the Hondo country, the messages had stated. New Mexico had no law force to cope with them. Citizens requested the Texas Rangers to come out and take care of the bandits. From John Chisum, owner of the famous Long Rail, had come one

of the appeals which had read:

> Since Texas spawned these outlaw killers, Texas should be duty-bound to destroy them.

Chisum, among others, also had inferred that attempts might be made on the lives of the Texas governor and other Austin officials, by these same desperadoes.

The Rangers were overworked to cover their own vast domain, and this warning had not been taken too seriously. Until daring simultaneous efforts were made not only to assassinate the governor, and Judge Jeffrey, but also Ranger Captain Bill McDowell. The Texas capital had been rocked and shaken to its foundations.

The assassins had failed in each instance. Guards had killed the man who had tried for the governor, and Ranger sentries had shot down the one who had moved against their chief. Judge Jeffreys had been only slightly wounded.

The dead gunmen had been former Texas badmen, but their identity gave no clue to the motive behind the shocking attempts. The surviving members of the invading gang had fled town, and Bill McDowell had dispatched four of his finest Rangers to track them down.

If New Mexico couldn't control this evil element, he had vowed, Texas would have to do it. Any outlaw band brash enough to strike at the very heart of Texas must be eliminated, regardless of state and territorial boundaries or jurisdiction. If they tried it once, they might try it again.

"Get them, wherever they go," Captain McDowell had ordered Jim Hatfield, whom he had placed in charge. "If you can't bring them back, kill them. The governor and the Rangers will stand behind you in anything you have to do, Jim."

SO JIM HATFIELD, a towering grim-jawed figure on his great golden stallion, now was approaching the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos River, with the mountains of New Mexico high and jagged before him. Somewhere in this sweeping, sunburnt wilderness, his three comrades were on their own separate traces. Milt Travers, Red Bouchard, and Fox Edley.

Hatfield was thoughtful as he read sign in the general direction of old Fort Sumner. The two sets of prints were familiar to his keen gray glance that was highlighted with green.

Under his hat brim his darkly weathered profile was strong, stern and proud, the bone structure standing out beneath the bronzed skin. Dust grayed his crisp black hair and sweated range garb, the alkali biting at nostrils and throat.

A big man on a big sorrel horse, relaxed but still alert in the scalding leather, he took in every detail of the landscape from long habit. For where Jim Hatfield rode, death was never far away. He had brought so many bandits to justice that his enemies among the lawless were legion.

The men who had struck at Austin, he thought, must have had some burning grievance against the governor, Judge Jeffrey, and Captain McDowell. Most likely those officials had been instrumental in arresting, convicting and either executing or jailing some close kin or friends of the Lincoln County outlaws. At this moment, back in the capital, researchers were poring over court records in an effort to identify all such men who had lost companions or relatives to the law of Texas.

But it would be a long, vague, and wearisome search. Hatfield was glad to be in the saddle, instead of at a headquarters' desk. Book work was too slow for this primitive land. On the frontier men with guns settled the score with most criminals.

The tracks turned off short of the next settlement, but Hatfield went on toward the quaint little Mexican village of Punta de la Glorietta. He would find the badmen he sought in the vicinity of Lincoln, if he didn't overtake them sooner. They were probably only hired gunhands anyway.

In town two horses drowsed at the cantina rack, but they were not the mounts Hatfield had been trailing. A few beers

would taste good, he thought, as he stepped down and left the sorrel, Goldy, in the shade before the sand-pitted adobe.

It was dim and cool inside the cantina, and the air was spiced with the aroma of Mexican cooking. For a few extra pesos the proprietor fetched a couple of bottles of beer cold and damp from the spring.

Two Americans, a man and a woman, sat at a corner table where they had just

JIM HATFIELD

finished their meal. Hatfield raised his glass toward them in a friendly salute. The woman, dark and vivid, with the bloom of youth, smiled back at him brightly, but the big blond man with her remained solemn and aloof.

Hatfield thought, turning to rest his elbows on the bar, Likely he has plenty of trouble with that fiery young filly.

The beer was delicious and refreshing, after eating so much dust and grit. He forgot it, though, surprised when the girl spoke close beside him.

"Mighty handsome horse you have, mister." The impish light in her brilliant blue eyes implied that she found the rider equally attractive.

"Thank you, ma'am," drawled Hatfield.

Her escort, rising and scowling, was not up to the Ranger's six-four height, but he was broader and heavier. A Swede from the look of him, and as strong as a bull moose.

"I'm Irene Durfee."

The girl gave her name as if it should signify something, and it did. Irish Bob Durfee—probably her father—was the first citizen of Lincoln town, a rich and esteemed merchant, Hatfield recalled. Good reason, perhaps, for this girl to be obviously spoiled, wilful to the point of arrogance, a young lady who did as she pleased.

"Jimson, ma'am," said Hatfield, using the name he often gave when on undercover missions, with his own name so widely known.

THEN the Swede was there, gripping Irene Durfee's arm and glaring at Hatfield as the girl introduced them with casual coolness, plainly enjoying the situation. The man's name was Johanssen, and Hatfield felt a little sorry for him.

"Come on, Irene," the Swede said. "Let's be riding."

"If Mr. Jimson's heading for Sumner, perhaps he'll join us," she murmured, giving the Ranger another flirtatious look.

"Glad to, if it's all right," Hatfield said agreeably.

"It ain't all right," Johanssen said thickly. "This is a good country to mind your own business in, mister."

Hatfield stared straight at him. "About what I was doing," he said mildly.

Johassen flushed to the roots of his fair hair, realizing the truth of what had been said, but anger was still in him. He let go of Irene's arm and seemed on the verge of striking out, but another look at Hatfield and sight of the two lowslung guns

changed his mind.

"Reckon I was wrong, Jimson," he mumbled awkwardly. "Come along with us if you want to."

Hatfield smiled and poured him a glass of beer. "Help me finish this and I'll do that, Johanssen."

The blond man accepted the glass with a shy, pleasant grin, and said, "Just call me Swede. It's a lot shorter."

"They call me Jim," said Hatfield. He felt oddly friendly toward this giant, who was so hopelessly in love with the dictatorial Durfee girl.

"That's better, boys," Irene said, and laughed. "Now we'll have a nice ride down Indian Avenue."

In the late afternoon, with the sun lowering above the Manzano Range in the west, they jogged southward along a wide, smooth roadway lined evenly with young cottonwoods. Irene Durfee played information guide for the tall stranger who was her saddle companion.

"Mescalero Apaches built this road and planted those trees, under Army supervision," she explanned. "It runs four straight miles into Sumner. Used to be a big reservation at Bosque Redondo. After they brought the Utes and the Navajos down from the north, there were ten thousand Indians on the Pecos."

Hatfield nodded, with interest. So this vivacious girl did have something in her head besides flirtation. She handled a horse well, too, riding astride in an expensive tailored habit, a striking full-bodied specimen of luscious feminity with her jet-black hair, her bright blue eyes, and the bloom of healthy youth in her lovely face.

And Johanssen, his first irrational anger gone entirely, was as likable as the Ranger had anticipated he would be.

"Dance in the old hospital at Fort Sumner tonight," Irene said suddenly, after a few moments of silence. "Swede and I are stopping for it. Maybe you will, too, Mr. Jimson?"

"Yeah, I need some help," rumbled Johanssen. "Beating off the young bucks that swarm around Irene is too much for one man."

"I can imagine," Hatfield said drily. "Maybe I'll stick around and give you a hand, Swede. I could use a break about this time."

On the northern outskirts of Sumner lay a small lake with grassy, flowered banks, which had been formed in the excavation left where earth had been removed to make adobe bricks for constructing the old military post. The Army had moved out, but the buildings were still occupied by settlers and businesses.

Irene Durfee furnished this information, too, in her clear, cultured tones, still concentrating her attention on Hatfield rather than on Johanssen. But Swede appeared to have reconciled himself to her capricious ways. He liked this Jimson, instinctively feeling that here was a man who could be trusted implicitly.

Gunfire crashed out in the woods north of the shore when they were nearing the lake, and was followed by the sound of hoofbeats and horses tearing through the brush. No lead had come in their direction, but Hatfield and Johanssen hauled out their saddle-guns and levered shells into the chambers.

The noise receded and died out, then a tall, gaunt rider emerged from the brush with a long arm upraised in the sign of peace. As he rode toward them, Johanssen said:

"Why, that's Pat Garrett, Irene! One of Maxwell's riders."

"Yes, I know him, Swede," she said. "I just love that Alabama accent of his." She turned her head. "And Pat's as tall as you are, Mr. Jimson!"

Garrett pulled up to exchange greetings. He acknowledged Hatfield with a nod, and said in a lazy, musical drawl:

"Come across two boys staked out in the brush there, waiting to pot somebody. Hung back to see who they were aiming to bushwhack. Appeared to be somebody in your party." His eyes twinkled at Hatfield, but he gave no other sign of recognition.

"Could be they were a couple of friends of mine," Hatfield conceded. "You know

the bushwhackers?"

"Didn't get a clear look at 'em," Pat Garrett said ruefully. "They lit out pretty fast when I fired over their heads. Looked to me like a couple of Lincoln owlhoots they call Musky and Pecos, but I couldn't say for certain."

"Much obliged, anyway," Hatfield said. "I'll take a look at their tracks."

He kneed Goldy off toward the woods, and the others drifted after him. It was a happy surprise to the Ranger to run across Pat Garrett here.

Behind him he heard Irene saying plaintively, "Why does Lincoln get blamed for everything that happens in this country, Pat?"

"Because the owlhoot gang that's headed by Guy Kircher and MacViccar hide out there," Garrett drawled. "And there's no law to bother 'em, Miss Irene."

"There's law in the town of Lincoln," she declared defensively.

Garrett laughed, with a soft lilt. "Catoe and Farina? Well, they do beat up and gunwhip and shoot a lot of drunken cowboys and saddle bums, if you call that enforcing the law."

"My father wouldn't like that, Pat," Irene Durfee said tightly.

Garrett shrugged high, rangy shoulders. "Your father's a good man, Irene, but I can't say much for some of his friends."

"Is that Lute Catoe and Jay Farina you're talking about?" asked Jim Hatfield, twisting around in his saddle.

"The same," Garrett said. "Marshals of Lincoln town. You know them, mister?"

"Heard of 'em somewhere," Hatfield admitted carelessly.

Those two killers were wanted in Texas. Ironical to find them posing as lawmen here, in the town that Irish Bob Durfee was supposed to boss.

At the site of the ambuscade, Hatfield got down to inspect the hoofprints and recognized the identifying marks at once. The same two sets of prints he had tracked all the way from Austin, losing them in places and picking them up in others.

So they had him spotted now! That was anything but good. If they lived long enough to reach the outlaw hideout, Hatfield would be exposed as a Ranger, and tagged for an early death. Even if he survived, it would be that much more difficult to operate with any success in this area, with every renegade in Lincoln County knowing he represented Texas law.

This New Mexico venture was beginning badly, but Hatfield masked his disappointment and swung back into the saddle with an easy smile.

"They'll try again—I hope," he remarked, as he and his saddle companion turned back to skirt the pond and enter the sprawling settlement.

At the livery the horses were unsaddled and turned out to roll in the corral dirt. Irene Durfee and Johanssen went to call on the Maxwells who lived in the huge adobe that once had been the fort headquarters. Left alone, Hatfield and Garrett shook hands and smiled warmly at one another.

"Thought maybe you'd forgotten me, Pat," said Hatfield.

"I'm not likely to forget that buffalo-hunting season on the Staked Plains, Jim." Garrett grinned. "But I didn't know if you wanted to be recognized or not, and I wasn't sure what I should call you."

"Going under the name of Jimson again, Pat."

"Well, tell me what you're after," Garrett said, "and maybe I can help you out a mite. Been aching to get after that bunch of buzzards on the Hondo myself, but one man'd be kinda lonesome against that crew of Guy Kircher's."

CHAPTER II

Old Fort Sumner

SUMNER was built on the north bank of the Pecos River, where it made a broad bend to the southeast. Moonlight flooded the wide parade, which now served as the main street of the settlement, sepa-

rating the old military structures from the newer stores and saloons that were backed against the stream. The adobe barracks, extending in long rows from the Maxwell home, were used as dwellings for both American and Mexican families.

With a good meal under their belts, Hatfield and Garrett strolled toward the former military hospital at the northeast edge of the community, their shadows long in the moonbeams. The night air of springtime was soft and balmy, fragrant with the scent of peach blossoms from the orchard reservation Indians had planted behind the hospital building. Music floated out over the buggies and wagons, and the racked saddle horses. The town had filled up for the monthly dance.

From Garrett, Hatfield learned a great deal about the state of affairs in Lincoln, which lay about a hundred miles to the southwest of Fort Sumner.

The Ranger expressed his surprise to find Irene Durfee wandering about so far away from home with a man—and unchaperoned—but Pat told him about the difficulty Irish Bob Durfee had in curbing his headstrong daughter. There was a lawyer named Renwick, Pat said, whom Irish Bob favored as a suitor for Irene, but she preferred to play the field. And at present she seemed most interested in Swede Johanssen who had a small ranch outside of Lincoln.

More seriously, Garrett told Hatfield that the bandits who undoubtedly had launched the blow against the Texas capital were holed up in the mountains west of Lincoln. They were always there when not out raiding the countryside. The leaders were Guy Kircher and MacViccar, names which so far meant nothing to Hatfield, but in the ranks were such notorious killers as Duke Seidule and Pedro Cibula, Horse Devenny and Obie Oberst, of whom he did know. Those names were familiar to lawmen within hundreds of miles.

"But there must be someone higher up, Pat," protested Hatfield. "We had the names of those men you have mentioned, and we checked on them. So far as we could tell none of them had any reason to hit our officials in Austin."

"You hear rumors of a brain trust behind the outlaw outfit—but nothing definite at all," Pat Garrett said.

"There must be something rotten right in the town of Lincoln," Hatfield said musingly, "with men like Catoe and Farina hired as marshals."

"That's always been my hunch," agreed Garrett. For a moment he was thoughtful, then suddenly said, "Jim, I reckon I'll draw my time from Maxwell and go along with you tomorrow—if you don't mind."

"Sure glad to have you, Pat. But I can't put you on the pay-roll."

"Don't worry about that. I been lucky at cards lately—real lucky. And I always wanted to try my hand at being a lawman."

Hatfield grinned. "We ought to make a pretty good pair."

"Why, sure," drawled Garrett. "The two tallest and toughest lawdogs in the whole Southwest."

Jim Hatfield was not enthused about putting in an appearance at the ball, but he had promised Irene and Swede that he would. Pat Garrett didn't mind going. Some of his numerous lady friends were certain to be there.

At the door of the old hospital which was pinch-hitting tonight as a dance hall, the two men had to check their guns, along with their hats and coats when they bought their tickets. Hatfield discarded his weapons with some misgivings. He should be out on the trail of Musky and Pecos. But they might be hanging around Sumner, waiting to get another crack at him.

HATFIELD danced with Irene Durfee and felt the allure and appeal of the girl, in spite of himself. She knew how to make a man feel big and powerful, handsome and indomitable, and it was flattering, as meaningless as it was. He decided that this was one method Irene used to make every man she met desire her, and probably was generally successful.

Later in the night, while Hatfield was wandering around the edge of the floor,

he ran into Garrett near the entrance and talked for an interval, the two men standing head and shoulders above most of the gay crowd. Suddenly Garrett stiffened, and nodded toward the wall.

Speaking softly, he said, "Your two friends, Pecos and Musky."

Following his glance, the Ranger saw two hulking, trail-worn men moving toward the door. But as he started after them, with Garrett at his heels, the pair broke into a run.

Hatfield lunged forward and drove his shoulder into the nearest man, ramming him against the wall. As they grappled there, the other man dug under his shirt for a concealed belly gun, but Pat Garrett smashed into him before he could draw. They crashed to the floor in a rolling, threshing tangle.

"I got Musky!" yelled Pat.

Emerging on top he pinned his victim down by the throat. With his huge free fist, he began clubbing Musky's purpling face, every stroke driving the man's skull into the hardwood planks.

But Pecos, Jim Hatfield's antagonist, was fighting with the fury of a wounded cougar, slashing out with both hands and lifting a wicked knee into Hatfield's crotch. Blind with agony, the Ranger doubled up and reeled backward, and the husky Mexican dived for the corridor that led outside. Hatfield recovered in time to catch Pecos and grind him against the door jamb with spine-snapping force. A groan burst from the Mex, and the breath wheezed from his lungs.

Grasping the man's shoulder Hatfield heaved and spun him back toward the dance floor. Pecos was tottering off-balance when Hatfield hit him with a ripping right hand. The Mex landed on the floor, sliding on the back of his neck. Crouching, Hatfield went in to nail him down, but there was no need of it. Pecos was out cold from that terriffic punch, so Hatfield begun to drag him toward the exit. In his wake came Garrett, hauling the unconscious Musky along the boards.

Brawls were too frequent at these festive affairs to cause any great alarm, and this one was over before a crowd could gather to break it up. Pausing at the door long enough to buckle on their guns, and don hats and coats, Hatfield and Garrett dragged their captives outside.

"What now, Jim?" panted Garrett, grinning at the Ranger.

"Where can we hold 'em, Pat?" asked Hatfield. "And make 'em talk?" His chest was heaving, and sweat was streaming down his face in the warm night.

"I know just the place," Garrett said. "Let's borrow this buckboard a minute."

They loaded the two senseless hulks onto the wagon, and Garrett took the reins. He drove toward the river, with Hatfield riding on back with the prisoners. "Good friend of mine," Pat said over his shoulder. "Got a cellar like a dungeon. Keep 'em as long as you like."

He pulled up in front of a substantial adobe house on the river bank and shouted;

"Gideon! Hey, Gid! Come out here!"

A warped, gray-bearded little man came stumping out on one crutch, and wagged his silvery head sorrowfully.

"Drunk again, Pat? When you going to straighten up and act like a man?"

Garrett's laughter shook the buckboard. "I'm not drunk tonight, Gid," he said, and went on to explain the situation.

"Sure, go ahead, Pat," said the old-timer. "Drive her right around back and I'll open up the cellar door. T'ain't good for nothing but a jail nohow, since we give up the garden."

In the cellar, by lantern, they brought Musky and Pecos to, but could not make them talk. Even threats of shooting them and dumping their bodies in the river failed to loosen their tongues.

"All right, Pat," Hatfield said finally. "We'll tie 'em and gag 'em and let 'em think it over all night. Maybe they'll feel like talking by morning."

WHEN Hatfield and Garrett drove back and alighted from the borrowed buckboard before the old army hospital, Irene Durfee and Johanssen were just emerging with three well-dressed

men. Garrett whistled softly.

"Irish Bob himself—the good-looking gent that's got hold of the girl's arm. Attorney Renwick on the other side of her. And the big bloated hombre is Bollinger, who owns the biggest spread in the Hondo country. Must have come hunting for Irene, and they're all pretty mad, I reckon."

"Will Johanssen be all right, Pat?" asked Hatfield.

"The Swede can take care of himself, Jim," said Garrett.

Irene sighted them and beckoned urgently.

Garrett was known and accorded a kind of grudging respect, Hatfield observed, as the girl presented him to her father and the other two men.

She said, "Mr. Garrett and Mr. Jimson have been chaperoning us, Dad."

"I won't have it, Irene," said Bob Durfee. "I'm not blaming or criticizing Swede. I know it was your fault. And I don't doubt it was all perfectly innocent. But it looks bad. My daughter running wild all over the country."

"And my fiancée," Renwick added, touching his waxed mustache with manicured fingers.

"I'm not wearing your ring, Ren," flared Irene Durfee.

"You've still got it, though, my dear."

"How do you know? Perhaps I sold it, Renny."

She laughed mockingly.

But Renwick only gestured airily, his serenity untouched.

Hatfield wondered if a brisk slap in the face would crack the lawyer's polished veneer.

BOLLINGER stood by, massive, stolid, and bored, chewing on a foul frayed cigar butt. A bull of a man, all appetite and driving greed. Hatfield could see what Garrett meant about Irish Bob's associates.

"Are you going to visit Lincoln, Mr. Jimson?" inquired Bob Durfee, with a flashing smile.

"I hope to, Mr. Durfee," said Hatfield.

He was aware of the trim, dapper man's magnetic personality. Durfee seemed to have depth and sincerity, too, but the Ranger couldn't be positive of this on first acquaintance.

Some politicians can fool a man, and Irish Bob had all the earmarks of being a highgrade politico.

"Always room for another good man," Durfee declared. "If you're looking for a job, call on me when you come to Lincoln. I have friends in almost every field of business there."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

Durfee switched his smile to Garrett. "And Pat, we're always glad to see you in town."

"Farina and Catoe didn't act that way last time I was there," Garrett said, grinning. "But I may ride along with Jimson and try it again."

Bollinger grunted and spat. "Come on, let's get to Maxwell's and roll into the soogans. Two more days riding ahead of us."

"That's right," agreed Irish Bob. "Good night to you gentlemen. Come along, Irene."

"I'll be in later," muttered Johanssen, and stood with Hatfield and Garrett as the group moved away in the moonlight.

"They come way up here after the girl, Swede?" asked Garrett.

JOHANSSEN shook his fair head. "I don't know, Pat. They seemed to be looking for somebody else, too, but they pounced on Irene quick enough. I was just hoping that weasel Renwick would say something."

"He don't dare to, outside of a courtroom." Garrett laughed.

"He ain't as soft as he acts though, Pat," objected Johanssen. "He packs a pistol under his arm, and they say he's pretty slick with it." He glanced at the quiet Hatfield. "What's the trouble, Jim? You as disgusted as I am."

"Not quite, Swede," said Hatfield, smiling. "Let's go and get a drink somewhere."

"I sure need a drink," Johanssen grum-

bled. "A whole bunch of 'em."

"That's not a bad idea," Pat Garrett said. "I reckon the gals in there can struggle along without me the rest of the evening."

"What was that fight about anyway, boys?" asked Johanssen, as they moved away.

"Nothing, Swede," said Hatfield. "Pat and I just wanted a little fun and excitement. . . ."

IN THE morning the Irish Bob Durfee party set out for home, while Garrett and Hatfield went to interview their captives in old Gideon's cellar.

Despite thirst, hunger, aching heads and the cramped torture of their bonds, Musky and Pecos still refused to answer questions.

Finally Hatfield arranged to leave them there for a week or so, and Garrett brought leg-irons and manacles from the old guardhouse in order to replace the crippling ropes.

Gideon readily agreed to watch and care for them, at the generous price which the Ranger paid him in advance.

"Bad ones, Gid," said Pat Garrett. "Don't feed 'em too heavy. Let 'em starve and suffer some. We want 'em ready to talk when we come back."

Gideon waved his crutch. "Don't fret. I know how to treat polecats like them. Just enough grub and water to keep 'em alive. And you boys better not try to drink Lincoln County dry, 'cause it can't be done. That I know right well from my own wicked youth."

Pat Garrett drew his pay from Pete Maxwell. The wealthy rancher regretted his departure but knew there was no way to hold a man like the lanky Southerner when the urge to travel was on him. Then Garrett and Jim Hatfield rode south along the Pecos, with Lincoln their ultimate destination.

"This is a good country to mind your own business in," said Johanssen

CHAPTER III

Gun Lords of Lincoln

IN LINCOLN COUNTY, on the second afternoon, Jim Hatfield and his saddle companion crossed Salt Creek. Garrett pointed out Johanssen's neat little J Slash spread, as they angled on in a southwesterly course toward the Rio Hondo and the mountains.

The town of Lincoln was on Bonito Creek, the upper fork of the Hondo, at the point where picturesque Bonito Canyon widened out into sweeping *vegas* dotted with ranches and farms. It was a busy little trading post for a two-hundred-mile radius, with goods being freighted in from distant Las Vegas, Santa Fe and the railhead at Trinidad. The Capitan Mountains rose sharply to the west and north, with other ranges tiered in the background.

In the late afternoon, when the shadow of the peaks were cool and tranquil on the plains, Hatfield and Garrett made a leisurely tour of the settlement with its old abode houses, wayside gardens, and gurgling *acequias*. Mexican carts loaded with firewood from the hills and alfalfa from the grasslands rumbled along the winding street. Close above the community high rock palisades were festooned with piñon and oak brush, and far up Bonito Canyon the sharp purple shoulder of El Capitan was visible against the sunset-painted skyline.

Garrett indicated a few landmarks, as they rode at a slow walk. The Church of San Juan. An ancient stone tower, with embrasures and loop-holes, from which the first Spanish settlers fought off Indian attackers. The Big Store of Irish Bob Durfee, and his adjacent freight yard. Two hotels, the Bonito House and the Montana House, the latter managed by a slick sharper named Zelhart, whom Garrett was inclined to dislike and mistrust. The Durfee mansion, an ugly fieldstone pile.

"Don't see those gunhawks, Catoe and Farina," drawled Garrett, his bony jaw thrust out. "But they shine mostly after sundown, I reckon."

"You don't care much for those two, do you, Pat?" said Hatfield.

"They killed a friend of mine, a half-breed Mex kid, when he was blind drunk," Garrett said, teeth grating. "They both went for him, Jim. Shot him through the arms, the legs, then put a couple in his belly. Left him in the street to die—and it took a long time, they tell me."

Hatfield nodded solemnly. "Those owlhoots used to do things like that in Texas. They're still wanted there. Maybe we better take them, Pat, first of all."

"Sure suits me," agreed Garrett.

In Lindemann's livery barn they unsaddled and rubbed down their horses, under the cold hostile eyes of the tall, scarecrow-thin owner, who appeared to nourish a bitter hatred against all humanity.

"In from the mountains?" he asked, eyeing their tied-down holsters. "Didn't know Kircher had 'em this big."

"Live and learn," Hatfield remarked lightly.

Lindemann cackled with wry glee. "I've already lived longer than you gun-sharps ever will."

"But you haven't learned much," Pat Garrett told him. "And you could stop living real sudden, you know."

"You don't scare me none," Lindemann said, wiping tobacco juice from his thin lips. "I see tougher ones than you every day. Jay and Lute'll cut you down mighty quick." He spat in their direction and wheeled back into his crude office with a dry chuckle.

"Jolly soul," Hatfield said, grinning at Pat.

"Lincoln's full of them," Garrett said. "All sweetness and light."

Carrying their saddle-bags and carbines along the street, they stopped in an abode saloon for a drink. Magill, the bluff red-faced proprietor, was as congenial and friendly as Lindemann had been hostile.

In the Montana House they signed up for a large double room, and Garrett in-

troduced Hatfield to Zelhart, a sleek debonair man in rather flashy clothes. There was a hint of menace about his smiling mouth and sober icy eyes. Zelhart looked more gambler than hotel owner.

As he was making the new arrivals welcome with half-ironic courtesy, a plump, rotund little man entered the lobby and waddled toward the desk, his full-moon face beaming with jovial good-humor. Zelhart greeted him and presented him as Olin Grier, operator of a grist and flour mill on the creek above town.

GRIER offered to buy drinks, but Hatfield and Garrett declined politely, pleading weariness and a desire to wash off the trail dirt.

"I'll send a boy up with hot water, soap and towels," Zelhart promised. "This isn't the Waldorf, but we do our best to make our guests comfortable and happy."

In the room to which they had been assigned they stripped off dusty sweated garments and relaxed over a bottle Garrett had stashed in his saddle bags.

"You've met most of the leading citizens of Lincoln already, Jim," drawled the tall, bright-eyed man from Alabama. "These today and those we saw in Sumner a couple nights ago. Kind of an odd lot of jiggers, aren't they?"

"They'll stand some studying," admitted Hatfield.

"Kircher and MacViccar and the outright badmen are seldom seen in town," Garrett said. "But like you say, they must have connections here."

"Does Durfee support Catoe and Farina?"

"Not wholly. He complains about them being too bloodthirsty and high-handed at times."

"Who's Josh Schartow? I saw his name on a few signs."

"A fine man—but a hard-luck one," Pat Garrett said. "His store and freight business tries to compete with Irish Bob Durfee, and that's a rough proposition to buck. I hear Schartow has lost a lot of loaded freight wagons, and he'll probably lose his shirt before he gets done."

"The thieves don't hit Durfee's wagons?" inquired Hatfield.

"Not often. They're afraid Irish Bob's too big to tackle."

"What about the county sheriff?"

Garrett laughed. "A fat old rumpot named Coyle. All he does is run a roadhouse up Bonito Canyon. He's a joke, a total loss, but he keeps getting the votes. Damned if I know how or why."

"Quite a law organization," Hatfield commented. "A drunken sheriff running a shady dive, and two professional killers strutting the town as marshals . . . What's your stake in this, Pat, besides getting even with Catoe and Farina?"

Pat Garrett smiled, slow and serious. "I want to be sheriff of this county, Jim. And some day I will be."

After washing up, shaving, and changing into fresh outfits, they had supper in the hotel dining room, then stepped out to look over night-time Lincoln. The moon was rising over the eastern plains, and stars were sparkling above the western crests. The hitch-rails along the crooked street were becoming crowded, and the saloons were beginning to seethe and roar. This sleepy little town came awake after nightfall.

"Glad we got here ahead of Musky and Pecos," said Jim Hatfield. "They'd be shooting at us already, if those two had reported in first."

"Before long, Jim, you'll see how Jay Farina and Lute Catoe buffalo the helpless and harmless drunks," Garrett said.

Hatfield inclined his dark head with a smile. "Then we'll get drunk ourselves, Pat, and they'll try to buffalo us."

"That's the ticket," drawled Garrett. "I can hardly wait to throw down on those murdering monkeys. It'll sure pleasure me to see them gutshot and squirming in the dirt. Just like they left my young friend, Martinez."

Feigning mild, good-natured intoxication, they made the rounds of the barrooms, and in Magill's Ruidoso Saloon they encountered the swagering lawmen of Lincoln. Jay Farina, a fancy dresser, had the cruel features of a predatory bird.

His partner, Lute Catoe, would have been evil enough without the ragged scars and pockmarks that disfigured his sullen dark countenance. To see those two men was to hate them, but fear was stronger than hatred in most of the inhabitants of the Hondo Valley.

Johanssen was drinking at the bar with two slim young riders, one of them fully inebriated. The marshals watched that trio hungrily. When Catoe stepped in to lay hands on the drunken cowboy, Magill spoke from behind the bar.

"No call for that, Lute. I told you before I can run my place and take care of my customers without your help."

"You think so, Magill?" jeered Catoe. "Well, we don't. Young Leeds is drunk here, and we're running him in."

JOHANSSEN turned, ponderous and deliberate, to stare steadily at the marshal. "I'll take care of Leeds, Catoe. He's not drinking any more, and he's not making any trouble. I'll get him home all right."

"Keep out of this, Squarehead," warned Farina, moving up beside Catoe. "We run this town, and you oughta know it by now, Swede. Mind your business or you'll get hurt."

"This is my business," Johanssen said. "The kid works for me."

Farina laughed. "Bail him out tomorrow then. Bring him along, Lute."

Jerking the cowboy away from the bar, Catoe propelled him roughly doorward. When Leeds began to struggle, Catoe tripped and slugged him at the same time. The young rider tumbled, rolled in the sawdust, and came up groggily on all fours. Farina chopped a fist across the back of his neck, and Leeds dropped face-down on the filthy floor.

Johanssen surged forward off the bar. The officers whirled to face and check him, poised to draw and daring the Swede to make a play.

"You wanta go with him, Blockhead?" rasped Catoe mockingly.

"Drop them belts and I'll take both of you," Johanssen gritted.

"Back up and shut up, Swede." Farina laughed. "Even you ain't dumb enough to interfere with the law."

"But *we* are, Jaybird," announced Pat Garrett. He lurched loosely forward as if far gone in drink, with Jim Hatfield swaying along behind him. "You're as rotten as the law you stand for, Jaybird!"

Onlookers scrambled out of line, but Jay Farina only laughed again, contemptuously. "Another one, Lute. And this one's big enough to buffalo!"

Drawing with deft swiftness, Farina raised his gun-barrel for the downward stroke. But it never fell.

Abruptly sober and lightning-fast, Pat Garrett drew and shot Jay Farina in the belly. The marshal grunted and doubled over, his ornamented sombero falling off and his pistol thudding after it. Straightening spasmodically, Farina groped for his left-hand weapon, and Garrett gave him another blast low in the body. This one smashed Farina backward and left him writhing in the sawdust, upsetting a table and chairs with his thrashing silver-inlaid boots.

Lute Catoe had started to draw on Hatfield, his ugly pitted face shocked by the sudden realization that these two towering men were sober and deadly. The Ranger's movement was faster than the eye could follow, a smooth, fleeting blur, and flame roared from his Colt before Catoe's barrel cleared leather. The slug shattered Catoe's right arm and sent his pistol spinning in the yellow lamplight.

With a stricken snarl Lute Catoe made his left-handed grab, game to the core in the final test, but Hatfield's gun leveled off from the recoil and blazed once more. The second bullet slashed into the man's chest and drove him reeling backward. Turning, and pawing the smoky air, Catoe took three spraddled, twitching steps and pitched full-length under a table, with his scarred face in the dirty sawdust. An overturned glass spilled liquor across his thighs, but Catoe never stirred.

Jay Farina was dying much more slowly, with Pat Garrett standing over him.

"Remember Martinez, Jaybird?" taunt-

ed Pat. "He was a friend of mine. How do you like 'em in the guts, Jaybird? Now you know how Martinez felt."

"Finish it," begged Farina, sweat beading his bird-of-prey features, and reddened hands clutching his abdomen. "Put me out, you big—"

"You haven't got long, Jaybird," said Garrett. "Not near as long as Marty had. Take it like a man. Martinez didn't cry, did he?"

At last it was over, with two men dead on the planks. Garrett and Hatfield reached for the drinks Magill had poured for them. Johanssen had picked up Leeds and placed him in a chair, and the Swede was smiling gratefully at the two tall men. Stunned spectators, still unable to believe their own eyes, gaped incredulously at the lifeless forms before them.

THE batwing doors burst open and Irish Bob Durfee came in with the elegant Renwick and hulking Bollinger, followed by a pair of tough-faced gunslung riders.

"What in hell has happened here?" demanded Durfee, staring at the sawdust-smeared corpses. "Good God, is that Catoe and Farina?" He whirled around, staring. "Who did it? Who murdered them"

"Easy, Bob," said Magill from behind the bar. "It wasn't murder. It was self-defense and a fair standup fight. And if you ask me, this community owes a vote of thanks to these two gentlemen here . . . Step up, boys, and drink on the house."

"Mike's right, Bob," said Swede Johanssen. "Farina and Catoe asked for it, and Garrett and Jimson gave it to them—real good."

Durfee accepted his drink with the rest and scanned Pat Garrett and the man they called Jimson shrewdly.

"That leaves us without any law, boys," he remarked. "And it takes fast guns to keep peace in Lincoln."

"We're looking for work, Mr. Durfee," Jim Hatfield said quietly. "And I guess our guns are fast enough."

"They certainly are if you took Jay and Lute—and you did. You want to wear their badges?"

"If the pay's right," drawled Pat Garrett.

"You'll find the pay satisfactory," Irish Bob Durfee assured, and shrugged. "Well, it looks like you've got jobs here."

Bollinger nudged him with a beefy arm. "Don't go off half-cocked, Bob. We don't know nothing about this Jimson. And not too much about Garrett."

Durfee smiled and motioned toward the dead men on the floor. "That's recommendation enough for me. You know anybody else who could've done that to Farina and Catoe?"

"Well, there's Antico and Halgout here," Bollinger growled, thumbing toward the lean, tense riders at his shoulder.

"They've got good jobs with you, Bix," said Durfee, suavely diplomatic. "You need them on the Rocking B more than we do in town."

Hatfield and Garrett moved back to survey Antico and Halgout, who were standing like leashed tigers beyond Bollinger's bulk.

"You boys want to be lawmen?" inquired Hatfield, with gentle malice.

"Not especially," Antico said, with a graceful shrug. "If we want them badges any time, we'll take 'em."

Irish Bob Durfee lifted a shapely hand. "No more war talk. We've got our new marshals—Mr. Jimson and Mr. Garrett. Now Michael Magill, the next round is on me." He smiled winningly at the new officers. "You boys are going to be busy."

"Hope so," Hatfield murmured. "But we won't be busy beating up drunks. In our book getting drunk is not breaking the law."

"That's for damn sure," drawled Garrett, with his musical Southern accent. "Saloon men like Mike Magill can handle the drunks."

Magill grinned and nodded. "You do me honor. For which the following round will be on the house once more. Drink hearty, lads, and name your poison again."

Hatfield smiled gravely over his glass rim. Things were developing almost precisely as he had planned and hoped.

CHAPTER IV

Grist for the Murder Mill

WITH no one to regret their passing, or to mourn them, Catoe and Farina were buried in boothill the next day, and Jim Hatfield and Pat Garrett were accepted as marshals of Lincoln. They were physically big enough to command respect in any company, and good enough with guns to have downed the two tyrants who had been deemed unbeatable in the Hondo.

Furthermore, Irish Bob Durfee had placed his seal of approval on the new officers, and that was sufficient for most people. No one seemed likely to challenge the new officers unless those Rocking B gunnies—Antico and Halgout—got around to it eventually.

In their first few days in office, Hatfield and Garrett won the esteem of the community. They were quiet, pleasant and friendly, so big and powerful they didn't have to impress with hardware. They maintained law and order without any bullying or brutality or conflict of any nature. Lincoln became a freer and happier place, with dread and fear no longer stalking the streets.

In addition to Swede Johanssen, they came to count upon Mike Magill and Josh Schartow as honest allies, while Renwick and Zelhart at least were decent and respectful toward them. Olin Grier, the miller, seemed genuinely fond of them. Only Bix Bollinger, the rancher, and Lindemann, the dour livery man, acted openly hostile, and even they were careful not to carry it too far.

Bob Durfee had them out to his great stone house for dinner, and made them feel well-liked and at home there. Irish Bob was a gracious host, and Irene clearly was enamoured of the tall fine-looking Hatfield. His indifference only sharpened her interest.

As Pat Garrett drawled, "You could be Number One with her, Jim. It shows every time she looks at you, man."

"Too much else to do, Pat," said Hatfield, with some slight regret.

"She's one beautiful Irish rose," sighed Garrett. "I wish she'd look at me that way."

One forenoon they were in Schartow's wagon yard, talking with Josh and waiting for the freighters he expected in from Santa Fe.

"Should've been here yesterday," Schartow said gloomily. "My wife's half-crazy and I'm getting worried myself. Our boy Bud is on one of them drays."

"You ever think anybody besides the Kircher gang might be jumping your wagons, Josh?" asked Hatfield.

"You mean Bob Durfee maybe?" Schartow shook his balding head. "No, Bob's a rival, but he's always been more than fair. Signs notes with me at the bank, lends me money himself, real helpful all around. But if I lose much more stuff I'll be out of business."

Schartow was a sober, stocky man, simple and forthright, sincerity plain in his mild steady brown eyes and rough, lined face.

It was nearly noon and Schartow was getting ready to go home for dinner, when Hatfield and Garrett mounted their horses and turned toward the street. The sound of running hoofbeats rose, and a rider came through the gate on a foaming wind-broken pony. It was young Buddy Schartow, terror in his eyes and a bloody bandage on his head. And Jim Hatfield did not have to be told that Josh had lost another string of loaded wagons!

The boy plunged past them and took the floundering horse on toward his father. The lawmen wheeled back to the loading platform where Schartow waited starkly. Buddy flung himself from the wet saddle and stumbled into his father's embrace, panting:

"They hit us in the mountains between Carrizozo and Nogal, Dad. Killed Flynn and run Taylor off and left me knocked out. Took everything—wagons and teams and all."

"Well, you're safe anyway, Bud," said

Josh Schartow. "That's the main thing, son . . . Recognize any of them?"

"From Kircher's and MacViccar's bunch all right, Dad. They wore masks but I could tell 'em. And I just saw some of the same horses up the canyon at Coyle's roadhouse."

"You sure of that, Buddy?"

"Dead sure, Dad."

The kid was either dead or dying. Other men, afoot and mounted, were rushing toward the trough, and someone was bringing up a light spring buggy. Rage erupted in Hatfield and spread like fiery lava through his great rangy frame. Beside him Garrett was swearing in soft, steady fury.

"Nothing we can do here, Pat," said Hatfield. "They'll get the boy to a doctor—

A TALL TEXAS TALE

OILY BIRD

WE HAVE so many oil magnates in Texas that even the census figures are only approximate. These men have no more respect for a million dollars than a snake has for a corset.

A good example is Jethro Bass. Jethro would put money into anything. Once he backed a spectacular religious theatrical production and at a conference for considering the cast he overheard someone say it was time to select the twelve apostles. Jethro spoke right up and said:

"Twelve, hell! Put in a hundred."

When the town council was planning a city park it was suggested that they buy a gondola to float around the lake.

"Get two, so we can raise our own," Jethro ordered.

But the thing that bowled everybody over was when Jethro remarked that he might take a trip to see Miami, and his wife said, "You know you don't like traveling. Why don't you send for it?"

—W. L. Hudson

THE boy moved away to a nearby horse trough and ducked his head in the water. As he straightened up, dripping, Jim Hatfield saw him lurch and heard the bullet strike, as a rifle boomed from the sheds at the rear of the enclosure.

Josh sprang forward and caught his son with a strangled moan, and Hatfield and Garrett raked out their Winchesters and rode for that jumble of sheds where powder-smoke was spreading and thinning on the breeze. There was no more shooting, but a rapid drum of hoofbeats floated back as the snipers took flight. It sounded like two horsemen.

Jim Hatfield glanced back and saw Josh Schartow kneeling and shaking his sunburnt bald head over the body of his son. if there's any use. Let's take after 'em."

Threading their way through outbuildings and littered equipment, they picked up the tracks of two horses and set out after them. The snipers had vanished into the nearby brush and hills, and by now the sound of their passage wasn't audible. But dust hung on the bright air and marked their course for the moment, and the Ranger threw Goldy into a high lope, with Garrett keeping pace on his big brown gelding.

The trail led into a dense choppy wilderness of tangled hills, then the steep mountains. They followed it for hours, without catching a glimpse of their quarry. It was mid-afternoon in the pine and spruce forests of the uplands, when the trace bent

back toward Bonita Canyon and Lincoln.

"They figure they've shaken us off by this time," Hatfield said. "Heading for home now, Pat."

Down long wooded slopes, fragrant with balsam and pine, they kept on the tracks of the killers, their hearts full of anger and grief as they thought of Buddy Schartow and his parents. A final sharp pitch dropped them into Bonito Canyon below Coyle's roadhouse. The Ranger was surprised when he picked out the prints in the trampled gravel and found them leading down the canyon toward town.

It was slower work on the hoof-churned wheel-rutted thoroughfare, but Jim Hatfield could read sign like a Comanche scout, and they made good progress as the sun sank nearer the Capitans behind them. When the tracks veered off toward the creek above the settlement, they were going in the direction of Olin Grier's mill. It was hard to suspect that plump innocent-looking man of anything murderous, but in this business a man never could tell.

The mill, stoutly constructed of rock and logs at the dammed river side, was silent and deserted-looking in the fading light. The wheels were not turning and no horses were visible, but the tracks led straight in to the layout.

Dismounting and ground-tying their horses, Hatfield and Garrett prowled forward through brush and boulders with Winchesters ready. They were at the edge of the clearing when rifle fire torched from two stone window sills, and richocheting bullets screeched through rocks and trees.

Instantly hitting the ground and unleashing their carbines, Hatfield and Pat Garrett poured fire into those open windows, their shots ripping up streamers of stone dust and splinters. Within the mill a man howled in stricken horror, and running footsteps receded rapidly. A few minutes later came the drum of hooves, and the crash of a horseman tearing through thickets beyond the big building.

But when Hatfield and Garrett started up to move in, one rifle lashed them back into cover. The wounded man was still on duty, holding the fort while his partner fled into the mountainous background.

HATFIELD, starting a flanking movement, glimpsed the defender in back of his window frame and hammered a shot at him. The shadowy form jerked backward and toppled from view, and the Ranger was certain he had scored a solid hit. But when Garrett exposed himself the rifle in the mill blazed away at him. They were still pinned down outside.

The sun was gone behind the lofty crags of the Capitans now, and lavender dusk deepened to purple and black in the canyon of the Bonito. The lawmen showed their hats and drew no fire from the lone defender. They got up and stalked forward, crouching, but no rifle spat at them from the interior.

Then a lumpy, misshapen bulk appeared on the open flagstone deck of the mill, lunging and staggering toward the creek. It was unmistakably Olin Grier, badly wounded but moving with frenzied determination, leaving a dark spatter of blood in back of him.

Before they could realize his intention and fire a shot, Olin Grier hurled himself out over the gushing dam with a final choked wail of anguish, and vanished into the white-spumed spray of the waterfall.

So both their men had escaped, one into death, the other still among the living—somewhere.

Striding on into the mill they entered the office. Hatfield lighted a lamp and went through Grier's desk with expert speed and thoroughness, while Garrett stood watch with his reloaded carbine. The place smelled of grain and flour, and the ceaseless roar of the dam brought visions of a plump riddled body washing downstream with the current.

"Grier didn't own this business," Jim Hatfield announced, riffling through sheafs of documents. "It's owned by some kind of a syndicate. And his name wasn't Grier—it was Oberst."

"Obie Oberst!" said Pat Garrett, with a long low whistle. "One of the worst outlaws in Kircher's crew. That soft, pulpy, grinning little hombre was Obie Oberst!

Living right here in Lincoln, and nobody ever guessed it. Who do you figure was with him today, Jim?"

"Might have been almost anybody in town, I reckon," Hatfield said, with a wry grimace. "Well, Pat, we'd better move along before we have too much company."

Back in Lincoln they learned that young Buddy Schartow had died late that afternoon. His father and mother were broken-hearted, beyond any human solace or comfort. Literally prostrated by their grief and loss. Irene Durfee had gone there to take care of them as best she could, and Irish Bob was paying the doctor's bill and funeral expenses, and raising a fund to aid the stricken family. . . .

Late that night in their hotel room, Jim Hatfield was awakened by a commotion in the corridor outside their door. A rushing movement, the impact of steel on flesh-and-bone, and the sound of a falling body. Out of bed and fully awake at once, with Colt in hand, he went to open the door with wary caution. Pat Garrett was up and crouching behind him with a poised gun.

The door opened into pallid flickering lamplight. Stretched on the floor of the hall was the immaculate Zelhart, the proprietor, huddled face-down over a double-barreled shotgun, blood from his broken head pooling darkly on the drab carpet. Standing over him was a familiar long, lean figure, hair glinting golden beneath a rakishly cocked hat. Hatfield smiled with relief and pleasure as he recognized Ranger Milt Travers, comrade of many a frontier campaign.

"Hit him a little too hard, Jim," complained Travers, in his soft, lazy voice. "Afraid he won't be coming to. But he was about ready to kick in your door and let go with both barrels, so I wanted to make damn sure he dropped."

They dragged Zelhart into the room, closed the door and lighted a lamp. Hatfield examined him while Garrett and Travers shook hands. Milt had been with Hatfield when they had first met Pat Garrett hunting buffalo on the Llano Estacado a few years before.

"He's a dead one, Milt," said Hatfield, rising from the body. "And it's probably a good thing, although I wish he'd lived long enough to do some talking. Let's lug him downstairs and have a look at his office."

"You think he was with Grier—I mean Oberst—this afternoon?" asked Garrett, as they pulled on pants, boots and shirts.

"Looks that way," said Hatfield, latching on his gun-belt.

APPARENTLY the disturbance had aroused nobody else, for the Montana House remained deep in slumber as they carried Zelhart's body along the corridor and downstairs. In the office they placed the body on a leather couch and covered it with a blanket. Travers and Garrett helped themselves to drinks and cigars and swapped stories, while Hatfield pried open the rolltop desk and went through the papers there.

"The same story here, boys," Hatfield said, at last. "The syndicate owns this hotel, as well as the mill. And Zelhart's real name was Duke Seidule."

"Oberst and Seidule," marveled Garrett, wagging his head. "Two of the blackest buzzards in all New Mexico operating right out in the open as mill owner and a hotel manager! Honest respectable citizens. I wonder how many more of those bandits are masquerading in this town?"

"Hard to say, Pat," murmured Hatfield. "But two of them are dead, at any rate. Have to watch and see who feels bad over those two, then go after the heavy mourners. And get someone alive and able to talk."

"So you boys are town marshals here?" Milt Travers grinned. "I'm sure glad I'm on the right side of the law in Lincoln. Pick out a key to a room near yours, Jim, and we'll adjourn upstairs to talk things over."

"This brandy of the Duke's is pretty good," Garrett remarked. "Might as well take it along with us. Getting up at this ungodly hour gives me a thirst."

Back in the bedroom, Hatfield brought Travers up to date on the situation here,

and Milt explained what had happened to him and the other two Rangers.

"After we split on the Staked Plains, Jim, the six men we were after bunched up again and brought me back with Red and the Fox. Trailed 'em all the way to Albuquerque and had a ruckus with 'em there. Dropped two of 'em, too dead to talk, and the rest got away. Bouchard and Edley were nicked—nothing serious, but enough to keep them out of the saddle a little while. They're laid up in Albuquerque, but in telegraph communication with Austin. So they may have some information when they get here."

Hatfield drained his glass. "Better hit the mattress, boys. Apt to be fireworks in the morning, when word gets around that Zelhart, alias Seidule, is dead and Grier, alias Oberst, is missing."

CHAPTER V

Strike at the J Slash

THE news circulated rapidly, soon after sunrise. The bullet-torn and water-swollen body of Grier had been discovered wedged among the shoreline boulders of Bonito Creek, and in the Montana House Zelhart had been bludgeoned to death by an unknown assailant. With a turmoil rising and boiling about them, Hatfield and Travers and Garrett waited calmly in the marshal's office at the jailhouse.

When Irish Bob Durfee arrived he was accompanied by Renwick, Bix Bollinger, and Lindemann, backed by those two gunhands, Halgout and Antico from the Rocking B crew. Durfee began an impassioned tirade, but Jim Hatfield cut him short.

"Just a minute, Mr. Durfee," Hatfield said. "You'd better know the truth before you charge us with dereliction of duty. Yesterday we trailed the men who shot Buddy Schartow—" He went on to describe the ensuing events and to reveal the true identity of the two dead men.

Bollinger snorted his disbelief, Lindemann sneered, and Renwick smiled with supercilious scorn.

Bob Durfee said shortly, "You expect us to believe that fantastic story, Jimson?"

"This pretty well proves it," Hatfield handed him the papers he had taken from the mill and the hotel, which identified Grier as Obie Oberst and Zelhart as Duke Seidule. "As for their killing the Schartow boy, you'll have to take our word for that. If you can't do that, we might as well hand in these badges."

"But *why*, Jimson?" Durfee shook his handsome head in bewilderment.

"Oberst and Seidule were members of the Kircher gang. Young Buddy had recognized some of the men who attacked the Schartow wagons, and on his way in the kid spotted some of their horses at Coyle's place. They shot the boy before he could tell us any more."

"All right," Durfee said finally. "You and Garrett carry on. This has been an awful shock, of course. Two men we considered friends and leading citizens of the community."

"I want to deputize Milt Travers here," Hatfield said. "We're liable to need help before this is finished."

Durfee and the others studied the slim blond Texan, and Bollinger snorted in disdain.

Travers drawled, "Don't let my pretty face fool you, Fat Man."

The rancher bridled resentfully and glanced at Antico and Halgout.

But Irish Bob Durfee said, "Go ahead, deputize him, Jimson. This is your office to run as you see fit . . . Come on, gentlemen."

"They took it pretty calm," Pat Garrett said, watching the group move away. "Reckon none of them belong to the gang, Jim."

"They seem to be in the clear," Hatfield admitted. "But they may be better actors than we realize."

In the afternoon Irene Durfee rode up and slid off in front of the office. She was wearing riding breeches and a man's soft shirt today, but looking as ripely feminine as ever. She said the Schartows had re-

covered somewhat from shock, and were bearing up better now. The funeral would be tomorrow.

The news about Grier and Zelhart didn't seem to surprise or concern Irene much.

"I'm riding out to Salt Creek," she said. "Afraid the outlaws are going to raid Johanssen's Slash J. Just a hunch, I guess, but a strong one. Will you boys come with me?" Her blue gaze lingered on the clean profile of Milt Travers, to whom the Ranger had introduced her.

"Well, the town seems quiet enough," Hatfield said, after due consideration. "And we promised Swede we'd be out soon."

"You and Milt go ahead with Irene, Jim," suggested Pat Garrett. "I'll stay here and keep an eye on things. One of us ought to be around, in case anything comes up."

"All right," agreed Hatfield. "We'll see you this evening."

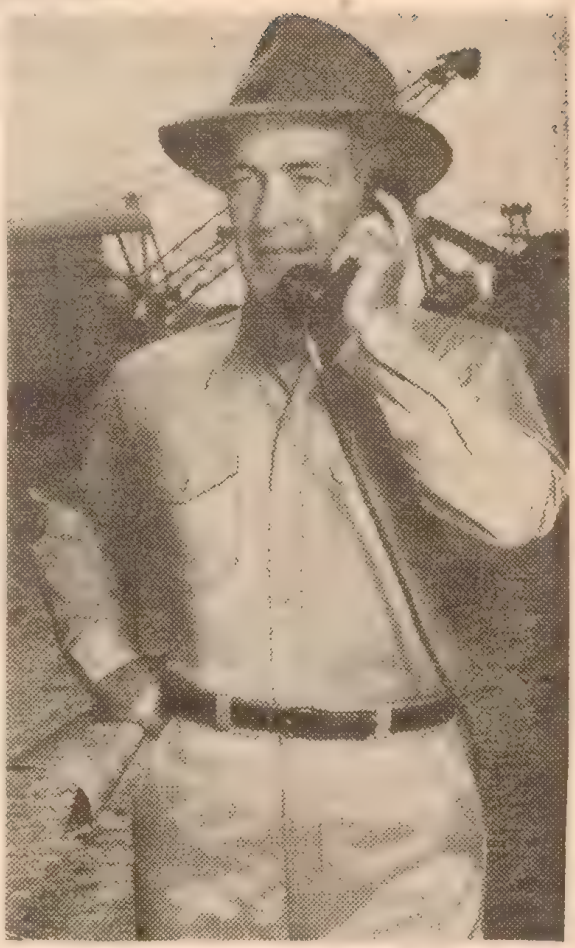
Irene and the two Rangers swung aboard their mounts and rode out of Lincoln in a northeasterly direction. The afternoon was glaring hot. The Capitans ranged along west of their course, dominated by the angular distinctive thrust of El Capitan, a famous landmark in this region.

IT WAS soon evident that Irene had switched her devotion from Hatfield to Travers, and Hatfield reflected ironically that this lovely girl was the butterfly type who favored every new flower that appeared. Poor Johanssen, he thought. You'd better stick to raising stock.

It was about twenty-five miles out, a pleasant afternoon ride over rolling prairies carpeted with buffalo, grama and galleta grass, an excellent cattle country with the mountains forming a background of grandeur on the western horizon. Cottonwoods and willows shaded the streams, and in drier places there was cactus and creosote bush, Spanish bayonet and screw bean. Bollinger's Rocking B lay almost due south on the Rio Hondo, according to Irene.

Swede Johanssen's genuine delight at

[*Turn page*]



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Lee CLOTHES FOR WORK AND PLAY

seeing them was soon somewhat dimmed when he noticed how entranced Irene seemed with the boyish blond Milt Travers. But Swede was gradually becoming hardened and resigned to this, for which Hatfield was thankful—for Johanssen's own welfare. A girl like Irene Durfee could cause a lot of misery.

They were finishing supper in the neat Spartan-simple little ranch house, when hooves pounded into the yard. Then young Leeds burst through the door, wild-eyed, sweaty and powder-streaked.

"Rustlers, Swede!" he panted. "Wounded Mapel, shot Navajo's horse under him, and ran off the herd from the south range!"

"Where are the boys now?" asked Johanssen. It was typical of him to think of his riders ahead of his beef loss.

"The Injun rigged a travois to take Mapel to the doctor in town."

"Which way did the rustlers run the stock?"

"South," said Leeds, accepting a drink shakily. "Straight toward the Hondo and the Rocking B."

"Well, we better see where they went," Johanssen said calmly. "You stay here, Irene."

"I will *not*!" she declared. "It was my hunch that brought us out here, Swede. I'm riding with you!"

Johanssen shrugged his great shoulders. "All right, let's saddle up."

Night came with a partly overcast sky, but there was enough moon to follow the broad gouged path of the herd without any difficulty. Ten miles to the south they were on Bollinger's grass, and some of the cattle that drifted before them wore the J Slash brand. It looked as if the rustlers had scattered the stolen herd over the Rocking B range and left the steers mingled with the home stock.

They went on toward the ranch, scanning the batches of animals they passed. Jim Hatfield pointed out critters wearing the Long Rail iron of John Chisum, their ears split in the weird jingle bob manner used by Chisum, one half erect and the other drooping forlornly.

"Looks like the outlaws use Bollinger's range for a holding ground for rustled stock," Hatfield said. "Which no doubt means that Bollinger is one of them, or working with them."

"Maybe his real name is Guy Kircher," drawled Travers.

"No, I saw Kircher once," Johanssen said. "He wears a full black beard and he's built different. As big as Bollinger, but all beef and muscle instead of fat."

They rode into the big, elaborate layout of the Rocking B, and Bix Bollinger appeared on the ranch house gallery, flanked as usual by the gunslung Antico and Halgout.

"What do you want here?" he boomed, eyeing the invaders with hostile suspicion.

"My herd was run off this evening," Johanssen said evenly. "My stock is scattered all over your grass now, Bix."

Bollinger laughed jeeringly. "You accusing me of stealing that two-bit herd of yours, Swede?"

"He's not accusing you of anything," Hatfield put in, crisp and cold. "But he wants his stock back."

"I sure as hell don't want it," Bollinger said. "Come over and cut out your stuff tomorrow, Swede. Nobody'll bother you here."

"You cut it out," Hatfield said. "And drive it back to the J Slash. Swede's short-handed since the raid, but you've got plenty of riders."

"Who the hell are you to give orders to me, Jimson?" bellowed Bollinger. "You got no jurisdiction outside of town."

"Since Lincoln County has no sheriff, we're extending our jurisdiction, Bollinger," said Hatfield, tapping his holsters. "As far as our guns can carry it. Do you, or those two gundogs of yours, want to challenge it?"

ANTICO and Halgout snarled and started forward, elbows out and hands clawed, but Bollinger brushed them back with massive sweeping arms.

"Let 'em strut while they can, boys," Bollinger growled. "All right, Mr. Marshal. We'll cut out Swede's stock and push 'em back onto his grass . . . Now get the

hell off my place!"

"I saw some Long Rail stuff out there, too," Hatfield said.

"Chisum'll get it next roundup time," Bollinger muttered. "Beat it now, before I call the boys out of the bunkhouse."

"Sure, we're leaving," Hatfield said, smiling. "But not because of you or your crew, Bollinger. Get those cattle back on Salt Creek tomorrow."

They rode out, conscious of the hostile herd. Otherwise the rustling of the stock seemed pointless, unless it had been done by Kircher's outfit and they made a practice of leaving stolen cattle scattered on Bollinger's range.

Lincoln lay about fifteen miles upriver and west of the Rocking B, and it was nearing midnight when they cantered into town after an unhurried ride. They wanted to find out how the wounded Mapel was, and young Leeds made directly for the

"It ain't enough he carries her around all day! At night, he's got to pull off her girdle!"

eyes riveted on their spines, and took the river road up the Hondo toward Bonito Creek and Lincoln, instead of heading back across country to the J Slash.

"What do you make of that, Jim?" inquired Milt Travers.

"I don't know what to make of it, Milt," Hatfield said uneasily. The only solution he could evolve left him chilled and hollow. Bollinger might be planning to have Johanssen killed, figuring this would obviate the necessity of returning Swede's doctor's. In the morning they meant to attend the funeral of Buddy Schwartow.

As they reached the turn-off to the livery yard, Irene Durfee restrained Hatfield and called good night to Travers and Johanssen, who rode on toward the stable.

"I really like Milt Travers," Irene said earnestly. "He's the sweetest boy I've met in a long time, Jim."

Hatfield laughed softly. "You've met your match in Milt, girl. He'll play the game with you, but it won't mean any

more to him than it does to you."

"You think I'm nothing but a silly shallow little flirt, don't you?" flared Irene.

"I'm afraid I do," Hatfield confessed gravely.

Irene tossed her dark head proudly. "Perhaps I'll fool you one of these days, Mr. Jimson!" She kicked her mare into a gallop for home, and Hatfield watched her go with a somber smile.

I've been fooled before, he conceded to himself. But I don't think I'm far wrong about you, Irene.

He had turned Goldy into the shadowy driveway leading to Lindemann's livery when a sudden premonition of danger caused him to rein up. Slipping lithely from the leather, he stalked forward on foot, loosening his guns in their sheaths.

Johanssen and Travers were unsaddling in the lanternlit archway of the barn, but Hatfield sensed other lurking presences. Pressed to the dark adobe wall beside the passage, he keened his eyes and ears against the night. Furtive boots crunched gravel somewhere in the area, then he saw two black forms creeping in from the corrals to his right.

Antico and Halgout had followed them upstream, or had bypassed them somewhere on the river road. For the Ranger recognized them even as he caught the dull glimmer of pistols in their hands, and palmed out his own Colts.

Then, in the barn behind the Swede and Milt, the lank Lindemann appeared, crouching in his office entrance, a sawed-off shotgun at his hip. Hatfield couldn't target on the livery man, because his friends and their horses blocked the field of fire. So he yelled:

"Look out! The office door!"

Milt Travers swiveled and drew with flawless speed and grace, his gun flaming at Lindemann. The shotgun belched thunderously into the floor, raising a great gout of dirt and splinters, and Lindemann fell forward and lay motionless over the scattergun.

WHIRLING, Antico opened fire in Hatfield's direction, the lead ripping and screaming off the adobe as the muzzle lights flickered vividly. The lawman felt the big guns buck against his wrists as he let go left, then right. The first slug smashed Antico in the middle, the second cut his legs from under him. Antico was down in the dirt, alive and writhing feebly, but out of the fight.

Johanssen had slapped the horses on into the stable, and he came around with gun in hand in time to glimpse Halgout aiming at Milt Travers' slender back. The Swede fired, jarring Halgout back on his heels and throwing the man's pistol out of line so that his shot missed Travers. But Halgout had swerved his barrel to bear upon Johanssen when Jim Hatfield's guns blasted simultaneously, slashing Halgout's legs and spilling him into a twisted heap on the ground.

Crippled as he was, Halgout squirmed around in the gravel to pump another shot into the barn, a wild one that loosed a shower of hay chaff from the ceiling. By then Milt Travers had spun about to fire at him, and Swede Johanssen's gun was flaring on a long down-slant. Shuddering under the heavy impacts, Halgout rolled over onto his back and lay spread-limbed in the dirt, face upturned to the night sky with eyes wide open, but bulging and sightless.

Hatfield reloaded and strode across the smoky yard. Halgout was dead, but he discovered that Antico was still breathing, though unconscious. Milt Travers took a look at Lindemann, and said the stableman was still living.

Townspeople rushed in from the street, Irish Bob Durfee and Renwick among them, but Pat Garrett was not. The Ranger wondered if some renegade had put a bullet into Pat's back during their absence.

Hatfield told Durfee what had occurred, both here and out on the range, but Irish Bob was not satisfied.

"We can't have this wholesale slaughter here, Jimson," he protested. "Wearing those badges doesn't give you the right to shoot down everybody in sight, man. I'm beginning to think you kill for the sake of killing!"

"Don't be a damn fool!" protested Hatfield wearily. "It was them or us. You want us to hold still and get knocked off? . . . Where's Pat Garrett?"

"He left town this afternoon," Durfee said. "Called back to Fort Sumner for some reason."

"Have somebody get Antico and Lindemann to the doctor—and Halgout to the undertaker," Hatfield said. "And clear this mob out of here, Mr. Durfee. I've got to take care of my horse."

He whistled loudly and Goldy came trotting through the crowd to his side. Durfee began relaying instructions to various men before he realized that for the first time in years he was acting on someone else's orders.

Lindemann regained consciousness as they began to move him, ranting and raving against the syndicate, which apparently owned this livery business as it did the mill and the hotel. Antico came to enough to admit, rather incoherently, that Bollinger had sent them here to kill the marshals and Johanssen. All this in the presence of Durfee who was compelled to apologize for what he had said to Hatfield. And he did it with all his heart-warming Celtic charm.

The horses cared for, Hatfield walked to the marshal's office with Milt Travers and Swede Johanssen, aware that all three of them might be lying dead if Irene Durfee hadn't held Jim back in the street. Leeds and Navajo returned from the doctor's to report that Mapel was coming along fine and would be all right. On the desk was a scribbled note from Pat Garrett, which said in part:

> Got word that old Gideon was killed in Sumner. That means somebody let Musky and Pecos out and murdered the old man. I've got to go up and tend to things, Jim, because I owe old Gid a hell of a lot more than I could ever pay back.

Johanssen said kindly to Leeds, "You and Navajo better go back and hold down the ranch. I'll be out tomorrow after the Schartow funeral."

"This is getting to be a great place for funerals," said the youthful Leeds, with a grin. "Keeps on everybody in Lincoln'll be up in boothill, and this'll be nothing but a ghost town."

Jim Hatfield smiled soberly. "The only one to be missed so far is Buddy Schartow. That's some consolation, anyway. The others are better off under the ground, and the world's a much better place without them."

CHAPTER VI

Threads From the Past

AFTER the funeral the next morning, the Rangers and Johanssen took their leave of the Schartows and started for Salt Creek. They were anxious to see if Bollinger would return the herd or strike at the J Slash in a more ruthless fashion. By now the big rancher must know that Halgout was dead and Antico wounded—his two ace gunhands lost to him. Bollinger wasn't likely to take that lying down.

Irene Durfee and her father, with Magill and other friends, had remained at the Schartow home. No one could have been more considerate and comforting than Irish Bob, but there was still something about Durfee that Hatfield didn't fully trust.

For one thing, he couldn't imagine an undercover syndicate controlling those various enterprises without Bob Durfee in a key position. An alert, ambitious business man like Durfee was bound to be a member of such a syndicate, and that organization was obviously linked to the outlaw band led by Kircher and MacViccar. On the other hand, the Ranger liked Irish Bob, was impressed by his kindness and generosity toward the stricken Schartows.

As he and his companions rode into the northeast, with the morning sun illuminating El Capitan in arrogant colorful splendor, Hatfield's thoughts turned to Fort Sumner and old Gideon, slain because he

had done a favor for Garrett and himself. After so much violent death, a man turned morbid and sick within himself, and Jim Hatfield was suffering those symptoms on this sun-bright day.

The funeral of young Buddy Schartow had probably started it, and the grief that would live forever with the boy's broken parents. It was well that the men who had killed him were dead also, but that didn't bring back the kid or console his mother and father.

In Hatfield's depressed mood everything seemed futile and hopeless. Killing outlaws in this vast country was like killing mosquitos in a swamp. For every one that died, a hundred more swarmed up to molest humanity. But a man had to do his job the best he could, had to war against evil as long as he was able to ride and fight. Until he ran into the bullet that bore his name, met the fate that was written in the Book for him.

"How you betting, Jim?" asked Travers, as they jogged along a bit behind Swede Johanssen.

"No cattle," Hatfield said darkly. "And maybe no ranch, Milt."

"That's what I'm afraid of," agreed Travers. "I reckon it's got Swede worried some, too. Bollinger's one of them, all right."

"And there must be more in Lincoln."

Travers nodded. "It's hard to suspect Bob Durfee, but the brains of the outfit are there somewhere. Renwick's smart enough maybe, but he isn't man enough to run an organization like that. And Bollinger doesn't know enough to do it. Maybe together, with Renwick's brains and Bollinger's brawn—"

"How do you like Irene, Milt?"

"She's in love with herself—and with love." Travers laughed. "I hope Swede wakes up before it's too late, Jim."

Johanssen dropped back beside them, his ruddy face haggard and rutted. "I got an empty feeling in the bottom of my belly," he grumbled. "Bix won't bring back my stock, but he might ride against the J Slash when he hears what happened at the livery barn last night. I'm scared for young Leeds and the Injun. Shouldn't have sent them out there by themselves."

"They're probably all right, Swede," Hatfield said reassuringly. But he did not feel the conviction he managed to put into his tone.

They swung eastward but there were no cattle grazing on the Swede's grasslands. Turning north again over a long swell in the prairie, they saw a dark smudge on the horizon with black filaments strung above it and birds circling in the sky. They booted their horses into a run and came within sight of the burned-out spread.

The adobe buildings were hollow blackened shells, and the wooden structures were charred, smoking mounds of ash and debris. Sections of corrals remained standing like scorched skeletons. Vultures were sailing lower over the carcasses of horses and dogs. There was no sign of life in the layout.

RIDING into the sooty ruins of the J Slash, they discovered the bodies of young Leeds and Navajo, shot to pieces and left in the steaming rubble. A great groan burst from Johanssen.

"Why did they fight? Why didn't they clear out and run for it?"

"There was nothing to be salvaged from the wreckage. The raiders had been thorough, and wrought total destruction, except for the adobe walls. Hatfield and Travers had looked on many such desolate scenes, but the sight never failed to gripe the stomach, wring the heart, and clutch at the throat. They wanted to soothe and help Swede, but there was nothing they could say or do.

They were digging graves with fire-scarred tools when the chop of hooves brought them erect and reaching for their Winchesters. Two horsemen were approaching, and Hatfield smiled as he identified the stumpy shape of Red Bouchard and the wiry form of Fox Edley.

"Red Bush and the Fox," murmured Travers. "They finally got sick of those Albuquerque saloons."

Dismounting nearby, Bouchard and Edley walked over to shake hands and be

presented to Johanssen.

"We was too late to do any good here," Bouchard said, rubbing his fiery whiskers "But we got a look at the buzzards as they lit out. Big, black-bearded giant heading the pack, with a good-looking laughing gent and another big man gone to fat."

"Kircher and MacVicear and Bix Bollinger," said Johanssen, hoarse with emotion.

"Of them three, Bollinger's the only one we got word about from Austin," said Fox Edley, blowing sweat from his sharp nose. "Bollinger had a brother arrested by Captain Bill McDowell, sentenced to death by Judge Jeffrey and refused a pardon by the governor. Telegram from headquarters named him and another hombre called Renwick."

"A lawyer in Lincoln," Hatfield said. "What about him?"

"His father was hung in Texas," said the Fox. "With them same three officials involved in the case which took him to the gallows. We was told to investigate Bollinger and Renwick plumb careful and close."

"Consider the investigation completed," Hatfield said. "The moment to act has come, and you boys are just in time for the fun."

Red Bouchard sighed and spat tobacco juice. "Told you, Fox, we should've stayed back in Albuquerque."

"Yeah, but they couldn't open the ball without us here, Red," said Edley, grinning.

Milt Travers stared at them and wagged his fair head in mock disgust. "Couple of conceited old coots, Jim. What's our first move now?"

"I'd say go back into Lincoln and get Renwick. Then go after Bollinger and the rest."

"Irish Bob Durfee won't like that much."

"He'll have to take it, whether he likes it or not," Hatfield said.

"There was about twenty in that wolf-pack that hit this spread," Bouchard told him, with an ominous shake of his red head.

Fox Edley laughed scornfully. "How long since them odds have worried us, Red Bush?"

"I'm in this with you, Jimson," Swede Johanssen said solemnly. "I don't know just what the game is, but I'm in it all the way now."

"Glad to have you, Swede," said Hatfield. "We're Rangers from Texas."

He went on to tell Johanssen the whole story then, at the same time informing Bouchard and Edley of the situation to date.

"Ought to be a cinch with them stars you're wearing," Fox Edley declared, winking at Bouchard.

Hatfield's smile was somber. "It won't be any cinch, Fox. Especially if Musky and Pecos get to Bollinger and Renwick before we do. They know I'm a Ranger, and they broke loose at Fort Sumner."

"Well, let's finish this chore and get started," Johanssen said gruffly. "Leeds

[Turn page]

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and the Injun wouldn't want us wasting too much time on 'em, I reckon, when there's important things to be done."

"You can use my shovel if you want to, Fox," said Travers, with bland generosity.

"Thanks, Milt, I'd sure like to," Fox Edley drawled. "But I got up from a sick bed to come here, and I'm still kinda puny and weak."

THEY lowered the blanket-wrapped bodies gently into the ground, filled in and smoothed the graves, and stood for a moment of silence with bared bent heads in the wind-torn sunshine. The fire reek was strong in their nostrils, bitter in their throats, and Johanssen was not alone in his cold-burning lust for vengeance.

"This is getting to be a great place for funerals," Young Leeds had said last night.

In the saddle again, Johanssen took one last look at the smoking ruins. "It comes to this," he murmured, as if to himself. "So be it then. Somebody'll pay."

"They'll all pay, Swede," said Hatfield gently. "For everything."

Riding back toward Lincoln in the garish heat of afternoon, there were five riders now where only three had ridden out. Four battle-hardened Texas Rangers and one brawny, stone-faced Swede, the reeking wreckage of his ranch and his two dead cowboys behind him.

And somewhere ahead was the enemy, the leaders known at last. A sly suave shyster named Renwick, and a burly, blustering rancher named Bollinger, with a horde of outlaws behind them. Guy Kircher and MacViccar, Pedro Cibula, Horse Devenny, and all the rest, including Pecos and Musky.

Five men against that renegade army—six if Pat Garrett came back. Well, the odds were never much better than that, Jim Hatfield reflected grimly. A Ranger got used to it—if he lived long enough.

The afternoon was waning and the shadow of the Capitan peaks engulfed the town when they rode in and swung down before the Ruidoso Saloon in quest of refreshment and information. Mike Magill was back on duty behind the bar, and he told them that Bix Bollinger and Renwick were in conference with Irish Bob at the Durfee mansion. Unattended by Rocking B riders, so far as Mike knew.

After one round Hatfield said, "Thanks, Mike," and wheeled away from the bar, with the other four trailing outdoors after him. "We'll never get a better chance," the Ranger said, as they climbed back into the hot leather and headed for the southwest outskirts of the settlement.

But when the ugly fieldstone mass of the Durfee house loomed in front of them Jim Hatfield pulled up abruptly with a raised hand, for a large company of horsemen was moving in from the outer plains. A warlike column, if he had ever seen one, with a black-whiskered giant riding at point.

Even as the Rangers hesitated, the incoming ranks broke into a cavalry charge with gunfire lashing out and lead droning through the dusk. Nothing to do but turn and run for it, and their horses were pretty well spent. Goldy could have outrun the pursuit, but Hatfield was dubious about the other mounts.

Whirling away into headlong flight toward the creek, the big Ranger's brain was racing faster than the broncs, but it froze numbly as another band of riders debouched from Bonito Canyon to cut them off and close the trap. Sliding their horses to a halt in a weltering storm of dust, with bullets humming all around them, the Rangers and the Swede drew their hand guns to make a stand against overwhelming numbers.

Five men caught between two inrushing forces, either one of which was large enough to crush and annihilate them in short order!

Well, here it is, Jim Hatfield thought, in disgust. It had to come some time, somewhere, and here it is in Lincoln, New Mexico. About all we can do is take some of them with us. As many as possible.

Then as he threw down and fired at the oncoming ranks, he glimpsed the high silhouette of the old stone watch-tower, an ancient and picturesque landmark against an evening sky still stained by sunset.

"The tower, boys!" he shouted through the racket of guns and hooves. "Cut for the tower!"

Kicking Goldy into a quick run, he drove for that nearby objective with the other four stringing out after him, all shooting from the saddle as they rode.

AT THE base the door was open, thank God, and large enough for the passage of mounted men. Hatfield pulled aside there to cover his comrades, emptying his right-hand Colt as they piled in through the entrance, the horses snorting and shying in the strange quarters. With bullets chewing rock and filling the dusky air with stone dust, Hatfield ducked and kneed his sorrel inside. Someone slammed the massive oaken door shut behind him.

The others were already busy with their Winchesters at the rifle slits, and Hatfield stepped down with his carbine in hand. Shots were shrieking off the stone wall and occasionally howling in through loopholes, but the rapid fire of the defenders soon beat back the assault.

Withdrawing into cover on all sides of the tower, the bandits settled down in the growing darkness to begin a siege. And it was then that the men inside the fortress began to realize they hadn't eaten since early morning breakfast. They had a little grub in their saddle-bags, but not nearly enough. Fortunately they did have canteen water and plenty of ammunition.

There was room enough for the horses at the bottom of the tower, and the riders loosened their double cinches and hung nosebags of grain on the animals. A winding stairway climbed the inner walls to an open lookout platform at the top, with embrasures and slits along the rude stone steps. Deployed at various levels on the staircase, they could cover every avenue of approach. But there was no chance of escaping. The enemy could starve them out in time, or bring up giant powder to blast the position and hasten the process.

"Fort Stanton's only ten miles away," Swede Johanssen said. "Too bad somebody doesn't call the troops in. Irene might do it, if she could get away. Or Mike Magill."

"Afraid the outlaws won't let anyone out of town," Jim Hatfield said. "But patrols from Stanton might hear the shooting and come in to investigate."

"You hope," murmured Travers, and Hatfield nodded grimly. That was all they had now—hope.

CHAPTER VII

Fort Up, and Fight

NOW the firing had subsided until only a few scattered shots were battering the tower now and then. The men inside it kept constant watch through the narrow apertures, but saved their shells until they spotted someone trying to move in. A sleepless night lay ahead of them, and already hunger was gnawing at their stomachs.

"Wouldn't be so bad if we had some drinking liquor," Fox Edley said.

"We'd have some if you wasn't such a hog," said Red Bouchard. "You had to guzzle it all down on the road, Fox."

"You had your turn at the bottle, Red Bush," reminded Edley. "And you take a lot bigger swigs than I do, I always noticed."

Hatfield mounted to the observation post at the top where the platform was ringed by a waist-high wall pierced with loopholes. From there he could see that they were entirely surrounded by foemen at moderate rifle range. The outlaws were utilizing the adobe houses, the corrals and garden walls, the *acequia* ditches, boulders, brush and trees for shelter. They were in no hurry at the moment. They had whisky to drink and time to spare, were shouting and laughing in the darkness that was pierced here and there by the glow of cigars and cigarettes that were like fireflies.

The tall Ranger wondered if Musky and Pecos were out there. It was quite likely.

He visualized the early Spaniards,

clumsy and clanking in armor, defending this tower against marauding Apaches or Comanches. Some of these old strongholds had secret underground passages. Perhaps this one did. Have to explore the base later, and see, he thought.

There was irony in this predicament. The men the Rangers had come all this distance to find were right outside now—and the lawmen were their helpless prisoners!

His mind went back to the Durfee mansion. Could it be possible for Renwick and Bollinger to be involved with the bandits, unbeknown to Irish Bob? It seemed improbable, yet it was within the realm of possibility. And it certainly was difficult to conceive of Durfee as an arch criminal.

He pondered then on Garrett's whereabouts. He hoped fervently that Pat wouldn't return and walk into this trap.

The hours dragged drearily, enlivened by a few tentative thrusts by the enemy, which the sharpshooters in the tower repulsed without too much trouble. During these brief but hot engagements, the interior was clouded densely with powder-smoke, and when the firing died down brass casings littered the stone stairway and floor. Johanssen and Milt Travers were seared by ricocheting slugs, and the horses were frenzied with fear, but neither men nor mounts were really injured—yet.

Between skirmishes the bandits taunted the trapped men with the hopelessness of their situation, the certainty of their deaths, and the prospects of embellishing the executions with certain diabolical Indian and Mexican tortures. Jimson was the principal target for this barbed venom, since the desperadoes blamed him for the killing of Obie Oberst and Duke Seidule, Catoe, Farina and Halgout. They promised to crucify him in front of San Juan Church, with a slow fire beneath his cross.

Others kept yelling, wanting to know just who this Jimson hombre thought he was. From the way he had been shooting up good men, and now seemed to have an idea he could shoot his way out of this tight with a whole skin, he must think he was the Lone Wolf himself!

At that particular taunt, Jim Hatfield's taut jaw became rock-hard. They were speaking better than they knew. For he *was* the Lone Wolf—the name by which Jim Hatfield was known far and wide.

Midnight came after an eternity of waiting. The late lights of Lincoln blinked out and the community slumbered, but the ring of outlaws remained awake and vigilant. In the tower, some of the men took turns napping fitfully, but Hatfield stayed alert, for all of his weariness, feeling a heavy responsibility for his companions.

Sometimes, he thought, it was better to work alone, as he had so often done in the past. That was what had led Roaring Bill McDowell to dub him the Lone Wolf in the first place. Always he was glad to work alone, too, for in that way if he fell, it would be without dragging down anyone else with him, particularly old friends like Milt, Red and Fox, and a new friend like Swede.

But that kind of thinking was worthless. Figure a way out of this, he silently advised himself. They say the Lone Wolf can think fast, don't they? Prove it!

He racked his brain with that intent, but to no avail.

There just wasn't any way out of this one, and he might as well face it.

TIME crept onward, the night stillness broken by infrequent rifle shots that spattered off the stone surface outside. The owlhoots weren't rash enough to try an all-out attack, but neither were they patient enough to play this waiting game for any great length of time. They would bring in some giant powder, if they hadn't already, and devise some means of blowing up the tower.

Several times, from his station at the top of the tower, Hatfield caught sight of men creeping forward through the shadows, singly or in pairs, and he drove them back with swift, accurate fire from his Winchester. He was bone-tired now, his eyes like molten lead in their sockets, nerves and muscles twitching and fluttering like over-taut wires.

The pangs of hunger knifed at his innards, and his mouth was gritty dry and foul-tasting. Boredom and monotony weighed on him, and the lagging hours stretched out in an infinite void. He shaped and smoked a cigarette, but it didn't help much.

Finally the moon was gone, the stars faded out, and pre-dawn blackness clothed the earth. Another endless expanse of time passed, and the sky in the east began to gray and lighten. Hatfield yawned and shivered miserably in his brush jacket, longing for the sunrise even if it brought battle and death.

Below on the stairs, Red Bouchard called up, "Put the coffee on, Jim, and I'll be up for a cup or two."

"Lace mine with brandy," called Fox Edley, somewhere beneath Red. "And make the bacon crisp, the eggs sunny side up."

Milt Travers laughed hoarsely and a canteen clinked. "Try some of this, Fox. Very sweet and nourishing."

Through the bantering a sudden thought struck Jim Hatfield and stilled the smile on his beard-stubbled powder-grimed face: If Bob Durfee is honest, he won't stand for this! He'll call the Army in from Fort Stanton. Maybe the troops are on the way already, if Irish Bob is the man he seems and pretends to be.

The shafts of light lengthened in the eastern sky, infused with lemon and orange hues as the sun neared the horizon. The besieging army was at breakfast in town, or around its own cookfires. The smell of boiling coffee, frying meat, and wood-smoke was maddening to those imprisoned in the Spanish tower; men who had been without a real meal for twenty-four hours.

After sunup, for the first time the Rangers saw some of the outlaws for whom they had come to New Mexico. Swede Johanssen identified them as they loitered out of range on the offensive perimeter.

Guy Kircher was a swaggering, black-bearded giant with a voice of thunder, and arrogant gestures to accompany it. In contrast to him MacViccar, handsome and graceful, in flamboyant range garb, seemed casual, carefree and nonchalant. He wore a lazy smile and an indifferent manner. Pedro Cibula was dark and sneering, dressed in a silver-conchaed charro jacket and steeple sombrero. Horsé Devenny, a fine strapping figure of young manhood, had an engaging grin and easy-going manner.

Hatfield failed to see Musky and Pecos in the enemy ranks, and Bix Bollinger and Renwick were keeping out of sight.

The sun was still low over the eastern plains when the bandits attacked in earnest. Four two-wheeled Mexican *carretos*, converted into armored vehicles by lashing sheet-iron across their fronts, were pushed toward the tower from four directions with crews of riflemen crouching behind them. Only the blistering fire

A small TEXAS TALE

•

TWICE TWINS

WACO, TEXAS, some years ago had a set of twin brothers—who looked so much alike even their parents had a hard time telling them apart. One night they dressed exactly alike and seated themselves on bar stools to see what would happen.

After a while a patron staggered up, took a long look at them, and hastily ordered a double shot of bourbon. He then took another look and quickly ordered another drink.

He was about to repeat the performance when one of the twins laughed and said, "It's all right, friend, you aren't as drunk as you think you are. We're twins."

The inebriated gent stared again, blinked, and drawled, "All four of you?"

—*Al Spong*

of Jim Hatfield and Red Bouchard from the top of the stone shaft prevented the shielded carts from reaching their objective. From that altitude, the two Rangers picked off and winged enough bandits to cause the withdrawal of the vehicles and the assault forces. To do this, however, they had to expose their upper bodies and draw a hail of lead. They were stung and scorched by near misses and sprayed with stone particles, but somehow escaped being hit solidly.

As the sun climbed, it became stifling hot inside the rock walls, the acrid stench of powder mingled with the sweat of men and horses, and the moldy odor of the ancient structure. The defenders began to feel famished, faint and weak in the suffocating heat of the narrow confines. But the siege continued, with bullets forever biting at the walls, or ripping in through the slitted openings to ricochet inside the tower. It was a stalemate, the dullest sort of combat.

AFTER another full-scale attack in mid-forenoon, when the outlaws once more were lashed back by scourging carbine fire, there was a lull in the action. Snipers kept chipping away at the loopholes, though, while the men inside the tower gulped brackish canteen water, rolled sweaty cigarettes, and reloaded hot Winchesters.

The suffering horses had been unsaddled and rubbed down, but Hatfield had not found any secret passage leading underground from the bastion. It looked as if the Spanish tower was destined to be their tomb.

Along toward noon Hatfield and Bouchard, kneeling in a litter of empty brass on the deck of the lookout platform, spotted a large moving dust cloud in the distance. But they did not announce their discovery, because both believed it marked the approach of enemy reinforcements, since the advance was not from the direction of Fort Stanton, to the west. More renegades when there were already a multitude too many!

In the early afternoon all firing ceased when Irene Durfee appeared before the tower with a large linen-draped tray. After some argument she was permitted to pass through to the embattled stone structure. Johanssen opened the door for her, his eyes shining with rapt appreciation. In spite of the tense situation she looked lovelier than ever, Hatfield had to admit, and it wasn't solely because of the food and drink she brought. The tray was heaped with good grub and a big bottle of brandy.

As the sweat-soaked, powder-blackened men ate hungrily and passed the bottle around, blessing the girl between mouthfuls, Irene said:

"There's a secret way out of here, a tunnel running under the street and coming out in back yards well beyond the outlaw lines. You'll have to leave your horses here, but you'd better take that passage. I think Dad sent for the Army, but you can't afford to wait. They've got dynamite and they're going to use it soon."

She showed Johanssen where to dig beneath the staircase, and after a few minutes Swede uncovered a trap-door in the stone floor.

"I doubt if anyone else remembers this tunnel," Irene said. "Certainly the bandits don't know anything about it." Smilingly she waved off their expressions of gratitude, and said cryptically, "This may be the last good deed I ever perform. Goodby, and goodluck—to all of you."

Johanssen reached for her awkwardly, but she evaded his grasp. Her blue eyes flickered briefly toward Hatfield and Travers, then she was gone, with Fox Edley closing the heavy door after her and dropping the stout oaken bar in place.

"Well, she came through for you, Swede," said Jim Hatfield.

"Not for me," mumbled Johanssen, with dull bitterness. "But that don't matter—as long as she came."

They finished the food, drained the bottle, and lit smokes that tasted right for the first time that day.

When the trap-door was lifted, it revealed rough-hewn stone steps descending into fetid blackness. After firing a

few brisk rounds from their usual positions, to keep the enemy pinned down, all reloaded their Winchesters and gathered at the subterranean entrance.

Hatfield hated to leave his sorrel, although he knew Goldy could take care of himself in any circumstance. They would have to appropriate horses from the livery barn—if they got that far—and recover their own mounts later. They had resaddled just in case.

Hatfield dug a candle stub out of his saddle-bags, lighted it, and led the descent into the underground darkness. The tunnel was damp, vile and musty, but unobstructed. Bent double, the men filed along it behind Hatfield and the faint candlelight, oppressed with the smell of raw earth and ancient decay.

The Spanish—or someone—had done a good job of it, shoring the passage with rock and timber. In places it had sagged and broken down, though, drifting the floor with debris and dirt. But for the most part the tunnel was sound and secure.

It was an eerie sensation to be prowling under the earth, and the passage seemed interminable. The air was bad and they began to feel smothered and slightly panicked, gasping and sweating in the murky darkness, their backs and legs aching from walking doubled-up.

"Feel more trapped here than I did in that damn tower," Fox Edley grumbled, and Hatfield smiled thinly at the truth of his comment.

"Foxes are supposed to live in holes," Red Bouchard said. "You ought to feel right at home down here."

"Don't trip on them red whiskers, Hermit," warned Edley.

HATFIELD stumbled on something brittle, and looked down. It was a moldering human skeleton in tatters of rotten buckskin. One poor devil who never got out.

"Looks like the Fox, only prettier," commented Bouchard.

At last light showed dimly ahead of them, and Hatfield sighed with relief. Crawling through a boulder-jumbled opening, they emerged beneath the overhanging bank of an *acequia*, ankle-deep in muddy water. But the open sky was a miracle of sun-shot blue overhead, and the fresh air marvelous to breathe and taste again.

Waving the others down, Hatfield removed his hat and peeped over the rim of the ditch. The back lots were quiet, empty of people, and Lindemann's livery was not far distant. They had made it, thanks to Irene Durfee, cheating death once more!

Crawling out of the trench, they started toward the barn and corrals, carbines ready in the crook of their elbows. A sudden command to halt chilled them through, and they wheeled carefully to face the back yard from which the order had come. A ragged row of outlaw riflemen stood there, but their weapons were dangling loosely or pointing at the ground. The command had come from a mounted lieutenant of the U. S. Cavalry, pistol in hand. Beside him stood a half-dozen troopers with their Spencer carbines lined on the Ranger group.

Irish Bob Durfee and a gray-mustached major rode up then, conferring with the young lieutenant, then trotting their horses toward Hatfield's party.

"Jimson—Travers, I'll have to take your badges," Durfee said. "And ask all of you to leave town. Your horses are being brought from the tower."

"What about the outlaws?" inquired Hatfield.

"What outlaws?" Durfee demanded. "Why are they outlaws any more than you are? I don't profess to know what this feud is about. I simply summoned the troops from Stanton to put a stop to it, and both sides are leaving Lincoln—at once."

"But—" Hatfield started, only to have the major cut him off.

"Don't argue, mister! Your lives have been saved and you're being offered safe conduct out of town. You should be grateful to Mr. Durfee—and to the military. Lincoln is under martial law until both factions have been cleared out and peace is restored."

Jim Hatfield swallowed his wrath and inclined his head. It was plain to see that the Army was completely under the spell of Irish Bob Durfee's magnetic charm. And Hatfield himself still wasn't certain just where Durfee stood in this matter, even though he had called in the cavalry.

He took his badge and Milt's, and handed them to Irish Bob.

"Sorry it turned out this way, Jimson," said Durfee.

"That's all right," said Hatfield. "I suppose you know that Johanssen's ranch was burned and two of his riders killed? And that his herd is on Bollinger's range now?"

Durfee stared aghast. "I cannot believe that."

The major snapped, "Mister, I told you to keep still! . . . Here are your horses. Mount and ride out of here. And don't come back!"

"Can I ask what your name is, Major?"

"Gorman."

"Thank you, Major Gorman," Hatfield said mildly. "Come on, boys. Let's head for more peaceful climes."

The five riders swung onto their mounts and loped out of town, lining in a northeasterly direction for the Pecos River and old Fort Sumner. Hatfield had a hunch that Pat Garrett might be in trouble up that way. The least they could do was find out for sure, and it would help pass the time until the Army pulled out of Lincoln, so they could go back there and finish their job.

CHAPTER VIII

Moonlight on the Pecos

JUST two afternoons later Jim Hatfield, his Ranger comrades, and Swede Johanssen were in Sumner, eating supper in a river-side restaurant.

They had learned that Pat Garrett had returned to busy old Gideon, then had disappeared again. Old Gid had been found dead, with his head bashed in. Nobody had been able to figure out why he had been murdered that way, or what the irons and chains from the old military guardhouse were doing in his cellar.

The adobe house belonged to Garrett now. Old Gideon had willed it to him. The place was just as Gid had left it, ready to live in, but empty now. Since these riders were friends of Pat's they might as well sleep there, stay as long as they liked, In fact. The house was just going to waste.

In the street they met Pete Maxwell. The cattleman was surprised to see Johanssen and Hatfield back at the fort. He'd heard vague rumors of a war between outlaw factions in Lincoln. Hatfield and the others supplied him with a few more authentic details.

"That Kircher bunch, huh?" sighed Maxwell. "Expect they'll be hitting my herds any time now. And I'm worried about Pat Garrett, too, boys. He went after the men who killed Gideon, but I'm afraid they've bushwhacked him by this time."

"We're going to bunk overnight in Gid's place," Jim Hatfield said. "And tomorrow we're going to go looking for Pat. Any idea which way he headed?"

"North, I think. Pat didn't talk much. Just said he was lighting out after Gid's killers."

The riders turned their horses into the old army compound that was now a public corral, and carried their bedrolls, carbines, and saddle gear to Gideon's adobe. They heated water for much-needed baths and shaves and, with a couple of bottles from the saloon, settled down in peace and comfort that seemed luxurious.

Worn-out from fighting, riding, and lack of sleep, it was a pleasure to lie back and relax in quarters of their own. Though there was litlle relief from private worry in any of them.

Swede Johanssen, for one, was brooding over the deaths of Leeds and Navajo, the loss of his ranch, and the belated knowledge that Irene Durfee was not for him. Nor for any one man, for long. Red Bouchard and Fox Edley were still a bit shaky and weak from the wounds that had bedded them in Albuquerque, and soon

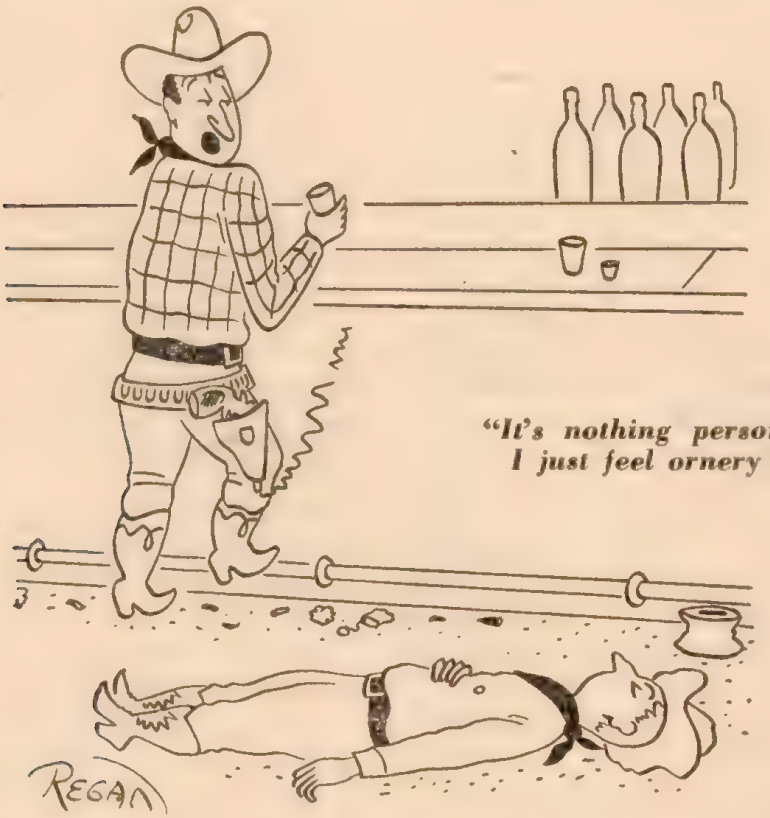
fell asleep. Milt Travers was restless, for he was impatient to get this mission completed. But from the present rate of progress it was beginning to look to him as if it would take all summer. But he knew he needed this rest, so finally disciplined himself to ease off into slumber.

Jim Hatfield needed sleep as much as any of the rest, but his brain wouldn't stop working tonight, regardless of how much will power he exerted to check it. After the others, even the morbid Swede, were sound asleep, he buckled on his guns, shrugged into his denim coat, put on his hat, and stepped quietly outside.

A crescent moon was tilted overhead, silvering the Pecos, and lights twinkled about the old parade ground. Stillness lay on Fort Sumner tonight, and Hatfield alone moved through the softly undulating shadows.

Without knowing why, he walked toward the old hospital building with the orchard and the lake beyond it. Something seemed persistently to tell him that Pat Garrett was in danger and not far away. One of those hunches that rose out of nowhere, but so often turned out to be true.

He passed the hospital and the last row of adobes, and went on toward the shimmer of the little lake, almost like a sleep-



"It's nothing personal, Slim, I just feel ornery today!"

walker. The Lone Wolf, prompted by deep primal instincts, was on the scent!

The perfume of peach blossoms and wildflowers came to him, with the clean smell of grass, leaves and water. He thought of Irene Durfee, of her warmth and beauty, but was instantly repelled, recalling the coldness of her heart, the shallowness of her nature. Johanssen, too, was beginning to see Irene in her true light, and that was a consolation. The big Swede was too good a man for that flir-

tatious colleen.

Light shimmered from the lake shore as a breeze riffled the trees, and Hatfield strode in that direction. In a small log cabin which came into view lamplight was glowing dully through burlap-hung windows.

THREE horses were tethered outside. And one of them was the powerful brown Pat Garrett rode! Moonbeams fell on tracks, and Hatfield crouched to examine them. Two sets of prints he remembered well. Musky and Pecos were in that hut with Pat!

Hatfield stalked warily forward, swinging to the side opposite the horses, moving through brush, rocks and trees with scarcely a sound. As he neared the window he saw that it was covered with a torn bran sack, and through the rips he could see into the dim-lit interior.

Pat Garrett was there all right. He was bound to a chair, his tousled head drooping and dripping blood. Pecos and Musky stood over him with balled fists and snarling faces, plainly trying to make Pat talk.

Pecos slashed his hand across Garrett's red-besmirched face. "Speak up, hombre," he growled, "or we'll beat your thick head off. Jimson's a Texas Ranger, ain't he? Answer, damn your soul!" Pecos slashed Garrett's face again. "That's for the night at the dance."

"You don't start talking pronto, you know what we're going to do?" Musky grated. "Shoot you through both arms and legs, and dump you in the lake. How do you like that, Alabam'?" He also smashed one fist after another into Garrett's battered face. "That's for the dance, too. And for chaining us up in that cellar!"

Jim Hatfield rounded the corner to the entrance, the horses stomping and whickering at his approach. Drawing his right-hand Colt, he flung the door open with a jarring crash. Pecos spun and reached fast, but the Ranger's gun already was lined and blazing. Pecos' right arm jerked and dangled brokenly, as his pistol skidded across the dirt floor.

Musky came around with gun aflame, and Hatfield felt the hot tug of that one on his left sleeve. His own blast walloped Musky's shoulder and it twirled the outlaw like a huge ungainly top. The weapon dropped from his numbed fingers.

Pecos was yanking at his left-hand gun when Hatfield reached him with a savage swipe of the long steel barrel. Grunting and bowing low under the impact, Pecos sagged to the earthen floor. Musky was trying to draw left-handed as the tall Ranger caught him over the ear with a vicious back-stroke of his Colt. Reeling, Musky toppled sideward and sprawled slackly in the dirt.

Pat Garrett raised his head and gave Hatfield a sick, bloody grin as the Ranger pulled out his knife and cut the thongs to set Pat free. Rising unsteadily, Pat massaged his arms and legs to restore circulation, blinking down at the men on the floor from his bruised eyes.

"Much obliged, Jim," he drawled. "Reckon they'll do the talking—this trip." He reached his gun-belt down from a wall peg, and strapped it around his lank waist. "Tell me about things in Lincoln, while we're waiting."

Hatfield told him about the happenings in the Hondo, then listened to Garrett's short recital of events here.

The outlaws, relieved of their weapons, were beginning to stir and whimper as their captors talked.

"These two beauties were in that deal in Austin, Jim," said Garrett. "Bragged about it to me. They were supposed to meet their bosses in Sumner, that night of the dance."

"Bollinger and Renwick," said Hatfield.

"And Irish Bob Durfee—I think." Garrett spat red from his mashed lips. "I figured Bob was straight—but I don't any more, Jim. If he called the troops to Lincoln, it was to cover himself."

Pecos sat up on the floor, groaning. "My arm's busted. Get me to a doctor."

They stared at him in stony silence. Then Musky's eyes opened slowly, still glazed, but he lay unmoving with his left hand gripping his wounded right shoulder.

"You're going to talk first," Hatfield said.

"And we mean *talk* this time," said Gar-

rett. "I'll loosen your dirty tongues if I have to beat you to death with a gun-barrel!"

Pecos wagged his bleeding head. "What? What can I tell you?"

"Who do you work for?" Hatfield demanded.

"Kircher and MacViccar. Pat knows that."

"The big bosses behind them," Garrett said. "Come on, spit it out."

"I don't know," Pecos sobbed. "Honest to Gawd, I don't!"

GARRETT drew a gun and leaned over him. "I'll help you remember, Pecos. I'll lay this right across your homely face, *muchacho.*"

"No, *no!*" moaned Pecos. "I'm hurt—bad enough. It's Renwick and Bollinger—I guess."

"Who else?"

"Bob Durfee—maybe. I can't say—for sure. Now take me to a doctor. My head's broke and my arm's killing me."

"No hurry, Pecos," said Hatfield. "What do you know about the syndicate?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing. Never heard of it."

"What's the next job your friends are pulling?"

Pecos started to shake his head, but Garrett's menacing gun-barrel opened his mouth. He said hurriedly:

"Cattle raids, they say. Tomorrow or the next night. Chisum's South Spring herd, and Maxwell's stock south of Fort Sumner."

"Who'll lead them?"

"Same ones, I reckon. Kircher and Mac and Bollinger."

"Then Renwick and Durfee will be home in Lincoln?"

Pecos lifted his left shoulder. "They always stay home, don't they? Never ride with us, that's damn sure."

Hatfield turned to the prostrate Musky. "How you feeling?" The man made no response, his eyes staring with fixed vacancy. Hatfield looked up. "Well, Pat, I'll patch these boys up a little, and we'll take them to the doctor in Sumner."

"Ought to kill 'em and feed 'em to the fish," Pat Garrett said, gingerly touching his cut, swollen features. "But I reckon that'll have to wait again, until they're on their feet with guns in their hands."

"I ain't riding no more with that bunch, Pat," declared Pecos earnestly.

Garrett laughed. "How right you are, me lad! You're going to jail for the rest of your life—if you live long enough to get there. Either way you won't be riding much—with them or anybody else."

"You ain't got nothing on me, Pat!" protested Pecos, whiningly.

"Just enough to hang you a hundred times," Garrett told him gravely.

A storm was gathering, and lightning flickered on far horizons. Thunder rumbled in distant peaks, and the night air was hushed, heavy and ominous with pent-up violence. It was going to be a good one when it broke.

The outlaws, split into two raiding parties, were out to rustle cattle from John Chisum and Pete Maxwell. The plan of Jim Hatfield was to arrest Durfee and Ren-

wick, than wait for the bandit chieftains to report back after the stolen stock had been drifted onto Bollinger's grass along the Hondo. If it worked out right, they should have all the leaders, either alive or dead, at the Durfee mansion.

Some time later tonight, Bix Bollinger and MacViccar and Guy Kircher would arrive to announce the success of their ventures on the Pecos. There might be others with them, but that trio, along with Cibula and Dévenny, were the most important ones left.

As the lawman party forded Bonito Creek and circled around behind the Durfee place, lightning cracked the heavens wide open. Thunder crashed with earth-shaking might, and rain came in wind-lashed torrents. Under cover of the storm, the six riders reached the Durfee stable

and dismounted behind the closed door. The doddening old hostler and his youthful attendant took them for members of the outlaw band. The two were accustomed to these sudden mysterious comings and goings in darkness.

While the others wiped dry their mounts, saddles and weapons, Hatfield and Travers donned slickers to go out into the downpour and scout the great stone house. Reaching a window of the dining room, they saw that Irene Durfee was dining by candlelight with her father and Renwick. The cook and a serving-maid were the only other persons in sight.

Buffeted by wind and rain, Jim Hatfield and Milt Travers returned quickly to the clean dry shelter of the spacious barn, with its odors of hay and grain, horses and leather.

"Let them finish eating," Hatfield said. "Then we'll go in."

"Where do the leaders report after a raid?" inquired Hatfield.

"What you mean?" muttered Pecos.

"You know what he means," Garrett said warningly. "You understand the language real good, Pecos."

"Durfee's house, I reckon," Pecos said sullenly. "I ain't talking no more. My head hurts and my arm hurts and I'm sick. Pat can beat me all he wants to, I ain't saying no more."

"You've said enough—for now," Pat Garrett declared pleasantly. "I'll get the horses, Jim, and we'll load these badmen on them. If the doc isn't drunk or bedded down with some squaw, he'll fix 'em up good enough for jail—or a rope."

Jim Hatfield nodded absently. "I guess Durfee is the big one, Pat," he said, with odd reluctance. "Boss of the syndicate, the bandits, and the whole rotten works in Lincoln County."

"Afraid he's the king pin all right," agreed Garrett, glancing at the wounded pair on the dirt floor. "If these two coyotes had killed old Gideon, I'd shoot them dead right here. But they didn't. It was Horse Devenny and Pedro Cibula. They did it when they came up to break these two loose."

CHAPTER IX

Lightning Over Lincoln

SIX riders now, lean and weathered and hard-bitten, with Colts on each hip and Winchesters in the saddle scabbards, approached Lincoln three evenings later—Jim Hatfield and Pat Garrett, towering high on their horses, slender Milt Travers, broad Swede Johanssen; and Red Bouchard, stocky and bearded, alongside sharp, wire-thin Fox Edley.

Six of the finest fighting men in the whole Southwest, moving with calm, quiet determination against tremendous odds. And on the trail southwest from Sumner, they had heard that the Army had left town once the emergency was over.

The storm was slackening somewhat when again they crossed from the stable to the house. Hatfield went to the back door with Bouchard and Edley, while Milt Travers took Garrett and Johanssen around to the front entrance.

The cook and the maid were wide-eyed but silent as they watched the three Rangers in wet-shining slickers pass through the kitchen toward the front of the house. The law found Durfee and Renwick in the luxurious living room with cigars and brandy. They could hear Irene upstairs.

With drawn gun Hatfield stepped into the room, followed by Red Bush and the Fox. Renwick made an abortive motion toward his shoulder-holster, then slowly dropped his hand.

Irish Bob Durfee masked his surprise and asked coldly, "What's the meaning of this, Jimson?"

"You're under arrest."

"By what authority?"

"The State of Texas," Jim Hatfield said, adding grimly, "and at the request and through permission of the Territory of New Mexico."

Both seated men stiffened. And at that moment Travers' detail entered the living

room and fanned out inside the front entrance. At a nod from Hatfield, Travers moved in to search the prisoners and remove their shoulder-slung pistols.

"You're insane," Durfee said to Hatfield contemptuously. "This is nothing but a holdup. What do you thieves want here?"

Hatfield showed his star-ringed Ranger badge. "You have an office in which you meet your field officers, Durfee. We'll wait in there." He had seen the office, with its private entrance, on previous visits.

"What are the charges?" drawled Renwick, fingering his waxed mustache.

"To numerous to mention in detail," Hatfield said. "They include murder, cattle rustling, holding up freight wagons—and attempting to assassinate three officials in Austin, Texas."

DURFEE laughed, and Renwick said, "We've never had the dubious pleasure of seeing that fair town, mister."

"Your father saw it, Renwick," said Hatfield. "It was the last place he ever did see, in fact. He was hanged there."

This shot went home. It's impact was evident in Renwick's eyes and bearing. Durfee was severely jolted, too.

"Let's move to the office," Hatfield repeated quietly, and glanced at his aides. "You boys douse these lamps and take positions flanking the office door. If Irene comes downstairs, hold her—and keep her quiet."

Under Hatfield's gun, Durfee and Renwick rose and walked to the office alcove that jutted from the middle of the living room wall. From windows at either end of the living room, the other men could command the outside approach to the bay window in the office.

Hatfield trailed his captives, and all hands settled down to wait, while the storm gradually subsided in the night.

A long hour later the rain had ceased, and after awhile they could hear the oncoming thump and splash of hoofbeats on soggy earth. Leaving Durfee and Renwick seated at their lighted desks, Hatfield withdrew into the shadows at the rear of the office. Outside, someone was at the door when a gunshot shattered the stillness.

Irene! Hatfield thought swiftly. From somewhere in the huge house she had fired that gun to warn off the bandits!

The front door burst open and Bix Bollinger stood there, mountainous in a gleaming-wet poncho, pistol in one ham-like hand. Shadowy forms lurked behind him.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Bix.

Jim Hatfield stepped forward with his Colt leveled. "Drop it, Bollinger. You haven't got a chance."

Bollinger was a rigid, motionless hulk, glaring at the tall Ranger. In the background hoarse voices arose and gunfire blasted, and the door was slammed shut behind the rancher's massive back.

Hatfield moved aside and fired just as Bollinger's gun blazed at him. The Ranger felt the windlash of the lead as it burned past to splinter the paneled wall. His own slug punched Bollinger backward, and the fat man seemed to shrink slowly inside his clothing like a punctured balloon. But his pistol jumped aflame once more, and if Hatfield had not been moving sideward the bullet would have drilled him.

Hatfield threw two more swift shots into that shriveling bulk then, and Bix Bollinger seemed to melt into a sodden shapeless mass on the Oriental rug. Outside a furious battle was raging, and Hatfield hurdled the rancher's body to reach and rip open the door.

Gun flames were lancing back and forth in the dripping darkness, and some horsemen were already fleeing into the night. Slugs whipped around Hatfield, and he fired back at the winking muzzle lights. His comrades were pouring a withering crossfire from the windows.

The Ranger trap had failed because of that first shot, Hatfield thought with rueful bitterness!

Horses were down, screaming and thrashing in the muddy driveway. A few men sprawled there or crept feebly into outlying shadows. Other outlaws were running for it, on foot or mounted. The fight was about over.

Hatfield had whirled back to cover Durfee and Renwick, when something crashed the back of his head just as he came around. Careless, he thought, as his brain exploded with a white light and flashing roar, and the carpeted floor rushed at his stunned face. But I figured they were too scared to stir.

Then he was on the floor, close to Bollinger's dead bulk, and consciousness flickered out as he sank into bottomless black oblivion. . . .

When Hatfield surfaced to awareness once more, his comrades were gathered about him as he lay on the living room couch. He was glad to see them all alive and unhurt, but he could tell from their expressions that the Durfees and Renwick had got away. He sat up slowly, head athrob with blinding pain, and drank the glass of brandy Fox Edley handed him.

"We botched that one," he said dully. "I suppose Irene fired that first shot?"

"My fault," mumbled Swede Johanssen, shame-faced. "I was watching her, but she fooled me—again. Never figured she'd have a gun."

HATFIELD smiled at him. "That's all right, Swede. I did worse than that. Left Durfee and Renwick uncovered behind my back . . . Well, it just means some more work, boys."

"You got Bollinger, Jim," said Pat Garrett. "I got Horse Devenny—for old Gid. And the boys dropped some more of them out there. But the big ones got away."

Milt Travers nodded his blond head. "Kircher, MacViccar and Cibula, along with Durfee and Renwick."

"They go together, Milt?"

"I think so. The rank and file broke and ran early, but the big three hung around to fight and cover the Durfees and Renwick. We were kind of busy at the windows. They must have gone out through the kitchen. I saw MacViccar fading in that direction toward the end."

"Well, they're gone—and it's my fault," Jim Hatfield said frankly. "We'll take after them tomorrow. Some of us, anyway. The rest will stay here to clean up details and keep Lincoln under control for awhile. Until they get some law here."

"That gang's pretty well busted up," Red Bouchard said, scrubbing at his fiery beard. "But the big wolves won't run far before they pick up the plunder they got cached around."

"Unless they had it all right here, Red," said Hatfield. "Ready to carry off any time things went bad."

"That could be," admitted Bouchard. "In that case they'd be heading out of this country for good, being caught up with here."

"Old Mexico maybe," Fox Edley said, sipping at his brandy with relish.

"Or Texas, Fox," Jim Hatfield said softly. "From the look in Renwick's eye, he still wants revenge on those authorities in Austin. And I've got a feeling Durfee also holds something against them. Did he ever have a son, Swede?"

"Understand he did," Johanssen said. "A boy a couple years older than Irene. Boy died young—or was killed early. Both of them thought a lot of that boy. Irene used to talk about him a lot, and once in awhile she'd get to crying over him."

"That may be the answer, boys," Hatfield murmured thoughtfully. "Bollinger had a brother, Renwick a father, and Durfee had a son. . . ."

When two Rangers headed out on their bandit chase the next day, the trace that Jim Hatfield and Milt Travers eventually settled on ran down Bonito Creek to the Hondo, and on past Bollinger's Rocking B toward Roswell and the Pecos River. Passing through settlements, they learned that the men they wanted were ahead of them. Irish Bob Durfee and his daughter, Renwick, the lawyer, Guy Kircher and MacViccar and Pedro Cibula were heading eastward together.

Rangers Red Bouchard and Fox Edley had been left in charge at Lincoln, supported by Pat Garrett and Swede Johanssen. A citizen's committee, headed by Mike Magill and Josh Schartow, had appointed Garrett town marshal, with Johanssen as his deputy. Already a move was under way for a special election to make

Pat Garrett the sheriff of Lincoln County.

Bollinger, Devenny, and other dead outlaws were buried in boot hill, alongside of those who had fallen in the fight at the tower. Antico, Lindemann, and other wounded bandits were under arrest and in the doctor's care.

The community was shocked by the guilt of Irish Bob Durfee, and many laid it to the influence of evil companions. Josh Schartow could scarcely believe it of his rival in business, for Irish Bob had been so kind and generous—on the surface.

But Mike Magill said, "Bob was always a mite too hungry for money and power. And if that son of his—a real no-good from the cradle up—was hung in Texas, Bob'll never rest until he gets even. Or dies a-trying."

A posse, gathered from towns all over the county, rode to the Rocking B to cut out the stock stolen from Johanssen, John Chisum, Pete Maxwell, and other ranchers, and return the cattle to their rightful owners.

Swede said, "Well, I still got a herd. All I have to do now is build a ranch for the poor critters."

"Best thing that ever happened to you, Swede," said Pat Garrett, "was Irene Durfee's leaving Lincoln."

"That I know—now," Johanssen agreed. "Don't rub it in, Pat."

Red Bouchard and Fox Edley complained good-naturedly that Hatfield and Travers always grabbed the good jobs and left them to do the dirty work. It wasn't fair nohow, they protested, even if them two did have more seniority in the service.

CHAPTER X

Hell on the Rio Hondo

REACHING Roswell at sundown, Jim Hatfield and Milt Travers racked their horses and went into a Mexican cantina famed for its food, particularly its enchiladas. The Durfee outfit might be stopping over here in Roswell, since it was about the last outpost of civilization they would strike for some distance, if they continued eastward to the Llano Estacado and Texas. After supper the Rangers meant to scout the busy town for them.

The tortillas were delicious, stacked eight deep and drowned in golden cheese, onions and chile sauce. After eating and drinking, the Rangers settled back in comfort, with cigars burning, and listened to the Spanish music of a quartet at the rear of the room. When they went outside the silver twilight still lingered, patterned with blue and lavender shadows and stained with yellow lamplight. Burros still grazed, and chickens not yet gone to roost, still scratched in alleys and back yards.

"You think they're heading for Texas, Jim?" Milt Travers asked musingly. The long cigar in his boyish brown face looked incongruous.

"I'd bet that way, Milt—if I had to bet," Hatfield said.

They were crossing the street toward their horses when they saw a black-whiskered giant pause in midstreet and stare at them from a distance of perhaps a hundred yards. Guy Kircher himself!

They swung in that direction and Kircher stood waiting, oblivious of the light traffic flowing by him. Then riders and vehicles began to pull aside, and pedestrians along the slat walks scrambled for shelter—and suddenly Jim Hatfield knew it was a trap!

His gray-green eyes swept the false fronts and board awnings of the adobes, and glimpsed riflemen perched aloft on either side of the thoroughfare. MacViccar at the left and Cibula on the right.

"Down, Milt!" he shouted. "Hit the dirt!" He lunged to the left himself as Travers plunged to the right.

Rifles crashed and boomed, and bullets stitched the dirt around them.

But Hatfield had drawn even as he had dived into the dust. Rolling once, he came up on his knees and lined his Colt on the crouched form of MacViccar on the wooden awning. The gun sprang in his grip, and MacViccar shuddered erect and stiff, the

grin on his clean-cut face freezing. Hatfield fired two shots, both hitting solidly. MacViccar toppled slowly from the awning in head-first spreadeagled flight and the dust, rolling up, covered him as he landed in the street.

Travers had begun shooting the moment he struck the ground, the flames from his weapon jetting up at a long angle. Pedro Cibula was working the lever of his rifle when Travers' slugs smashed him backward. He rolled loosely over the awning edge into the alley, where tin cans jangled as his quivering body struck.

On their feet again, Hatfield and Travers looked for Kircher, but the black-bearded outlaw had vanished. Men on the sidewalks pointed out the downriver road toward the Pecos.

The Rangers went to their respective victims, and found them still alive. Then the sheriff of Chaves County appeared on the scene with two deputies. Hatfield and Travers showed their Ranger stars, told who the wounded bandits were, and the sheriff commandeered a buckboard to transport MacViccar and Cibula to a doctor.

"Milt, you'd better stay here with them," Hatfield said. "I'll go on after Kircher."

"The others must be ahead of him, Jim," said Travers. "I'm riding with you."

"I'll hold these men for you—if they live," promised the sheriff. "They been hurrahing this Hondo country way too long. It's a fine bit of work you Texans have done here this evening."

"All right, Milt, we'll ride together," said Hatfield. "And Sheriff, we're obliged to you."

As men hoisted MacViccar to the wagon bed, he was babbling, "Crazy, plumb crazy! Making for Austin, Texas, them fools . . . No sense to it. Tried to tell 'em. Crazy—all crazy—and dead. Dead for sure."

HATFIELD and Travers untied their mounts, stepped into the leather, and rode out with curious fascinated eyes gazing after them. Down the Hondo toward its junction with the Pecos. Only three men ahead of them now. Three men and one girl, with time and luck running out on them. The end of a rainbow that had been only a mirage from the start.

Outside of Roswell, the bay under Milt Travers stumbled, and went so lame that Milt had to dismount and lead.

"Go ahead, Jim," he said, at last. "I'll swap horses somewhere and try to catch up with you."

Hatfield left Travers cursing softly at his horse and the luck, and went on with increased speed aboard his splendid golden sorrel. The Lone Wolf again, with three men and a woman to run down. Kircher was formidable. Durfee and Renwick probably were more dangerous than might be thought, offhand. And Irene was unpredictable. Like her father, she was a paradox, and not to be ignored or taken lightly. . . .

The fugitives had been at odds ever since they had left Bonito Creek. Only Irish Bob Durfee wanted to go to Texas. He was still the boss, but his authority was lessening, with the organization broken and scattered, and so many key operatives dead. Yet as long as Durfee and Renwick carried the bulk of the stolen fortune, the other three men had been forced to string along with them. And to take orders from Durfee, like when he had told them to stay behind in Roswell and eliminate the pursuit.

The night was young, and Roswell only about eight miles behind when Irene said she was too tired to travel any farther.

"We ought to leave her somewhere anyway, Bob," said Renwick, in cold, clipped tones. "Can't make time with a woman along."

Irene looked at him with loathing, and Bob Durfee said, "It won't be so necessary to make time, Ren, after the boys do their job back in town."

"I doubt if they'll stop those Rangers," said Renwick, who seemed to grow in stature as Durfee diminished. "I should have done it myself."

"*You?*" Irene cried caustically. "What would you amount to against men like Jimson and Travers?"

Renwick smiled calmly beneath his mustache. "You don't know much about me, do you, Irene?"

"As much or more than I want to, Renny," she said, with a disparaging laugh.

"There's a wayside cantina ahead," Durfee announced glumly. "I suppose we can stop there overnight."

Renwick laughed with light mockery. "No road houses on the Staked Plains. What then, Bob?"

Durfee glared at him with annoyance, but Renwick remained superior and unshaken. There was more steel under the lawyer's polished surface than even Irish Bob had imagined.

They were stabling their horses in back of the cantina when Guy Kircher rode in alone and morose.

"Where are the others, Guy?" snapped Durfee.

"Dead—or wounded," Kircher growled. "It backfired on us, Bob."

"Just as I expected," Renwick said scornfully. "Well, tell us what happened."

Kircher told them tersely, and finished, "Damned if I know how Mac and Pedro missed 'em. Had 'em right under their rifles. Anybody but them Rangers would have died right then and there."

"Why didn't you move into it, Guy?" demanded Renwick.

Kircher eyed him with disgust. "Why don't you go to hell, Fancy Dan? Keep your tongue off me, or I'll cuff you bowlegged."

"Don't try it, Blackbeard," said Renwick, with an icy smile.

Durfee lifted his hand. "Stop the foolishness! What do we do now? They'll be coming, I suppose."

"They'll be along all right," Guy Kircher said grimly, pulling his rifle from the saddle-boot. "Reckon it's up to me to stop 'em, ain't it? They get me, you two will have to do your own fighting—for once."

RENWICK smiled and drew his carbine from the scabbard. "I'll go with you, Guy." He unstrapped his spurs and hung them with his saddle gear. "Bob, you and Irene wait in the cantina—and don't worry. The Rangers won't get by us."

Undoing his own spurs, Kircher looked up with a grin. "Quite a little banty rooster, ain't he, Bob? If he fights as good as he talks we'll stop 'em for sure."

"If you can't get them from ambush, you are not much good," Irish Bob Durfee said, sarcastically. "Come on, Irene. A drink will taste fine now."

As father and daughter started from the barn, Renwick glanced at Kircher. "Why don't we take Bob and his money-belt and light out on our own, Guy?"

Kircher considered briefly. "Not a bad notion. Call him back."

Renwick raised his voice. "Oh, Bob! Come here a minute, will you?"

Durfee turned back, and Irene went on into the cantina. As Durfee faced Renwick, Kircher moved behind him and raised the steel-shod butt of the rifle. It smashed the back of Durfee's head with crushing force, and Irish Bob fell forward on his face. Deftly, quickly, Renwick snaked off the thick-padded money-belt and took the wallet from Durfee's pocket.

"You killed him, you big stupid lout!" Renwick said contemptuously. "Can't you do anything right?"

"Don't be calling me names, you weasel!" growled Kircher, refastening the spurs to his boots. "What if I did kill him?" Picking up the rifle he walked toward his horse.

Some animal instinct and the prolonged silence from the lawyer suddenly brought him wheeling about. Renwick stood there, trim and elegant in the dull lanternlight, hands in the pockets of his tailored coat, an inscrutable smile on his overbred features.

"So you're thinking of taking me next, you pip-squeak!" snarled Kircher, black beard bristling with fury as he brought his rifle to bear.

A derringer cracked spitefully from Renwick's right-hand pocket, the thin flame stabbing through cloth and into Kircher's wide belly. Bending in the middle, the giant struggled to line his rifle, but Renwick gave him the second barrel of the

little hideout gun and this shot shattered Kircher's chest. Sinking slowly and ponderously to his knees, Guy Kircher uttered a sighing groan and pitched forward.

Ripping loose the big man's money-belt and pocketbook, Renwick climbed onto Kircher's horse, snuffed the hanging lantern, and rode into the vast night.

Gloating over the fabulous fortune he now carried and the fact that there was no one left to share it with, Renwick reached the road. He was about to turn east toward the Pecos when he glimpsed a big rider coming on a great golden stallion. He put down the impulse to flee. There would be no sense in trying to run away from that horse and rider. Better to stand and fight it out.

Drawing a heavy Colt Renwick waited with calm confidence, certain that his nerve and skill were the equal of any man's. He couldn't die now, not with all this wealth on him. Life was just beginning. Sitting his saddle with easy elegance, he waited for the range to shorten.

Jim Hatfield had seen the lights of the cantina ahead, then had seen the horseman who emerged from the shadows and halted to await him. It was Renwick, the sleek attorney, he realized with dim wonder, and the man had a quiet assurance the Ranger could not help but admire.

He thought wryly, we must have underestimated this one all along.

Renwick had drawn, and Hatfield eased his right-hand gun from the leather, slowing Goldy to a steady walk. As the distance closed the pressure and tension mounted unbearably.

IT WAS Renwick who fired first, for the range was still long for hand guns. The flame leaped level and lead whipped close to the Ranger. Lining his own barrel with infinite precision, Jim Hatfield squeezed trigger and felt the buck of the Colt. Renwick shuddered, and swayed in saddle. The first one was home hard and solid.

Renwick was shooting fast but wild then, the muzzle lights streaking in swift succession and the slugs snarling past the Ranger and his golden mount.

Pulling down from the recoil, Hatfield hammered another shot at the dapper figure, and hit once more. Renwick crumpled and rocked backward. As his horse bolted the lawyer bounced over the cantle, sliding from the animal's rump, and spilled in the churned dirt of the roadway.

Jim Hatfield put his sorrel forward and swung down beside the slack, still form. Renwick was dead.

Then people were boiling out of the cantina, Irene Durfee among them. And Irene was screaming:

"You killed my father, Jimson! Where is he?"

"I haven't seen your father, Irene," said Hatfield. "Renwick's the only one I saw here."

"The stable!" Irene cried, and whirled to run toward it.

Hatfield led Goddy as he followed her and the others, and a man who caught the horse Renwick had been riding followed behind the big Ranger. In the barn someone lighted a lantern. They found Guy Kircher dead, and Irish Bob Durfee unconscious on the packed earth floor.

"Renwick crossed them, Irene," Hatfield said softly. "But your dad's alive, and he will be all right."

"Until you hang him in Austin!" she flared. "Like you did my brother John!"

"That's out of my hands," Hatfield told her. "Your father will have to stand trial, of course. Along with Cibula and MacViccar and the rest."

"I'm glad it's ended, anyway," Irene Durfee said brokenly. "The money will be on Renwick—or in his saddle-bags. You'd better get it."

"I will," promised Hatfield.

He instructed some of the men to carry Durfee inside, and other to attend to the horses and the two dead men. After collecting the money-belts and wallets, he followed Irene into the cantina.

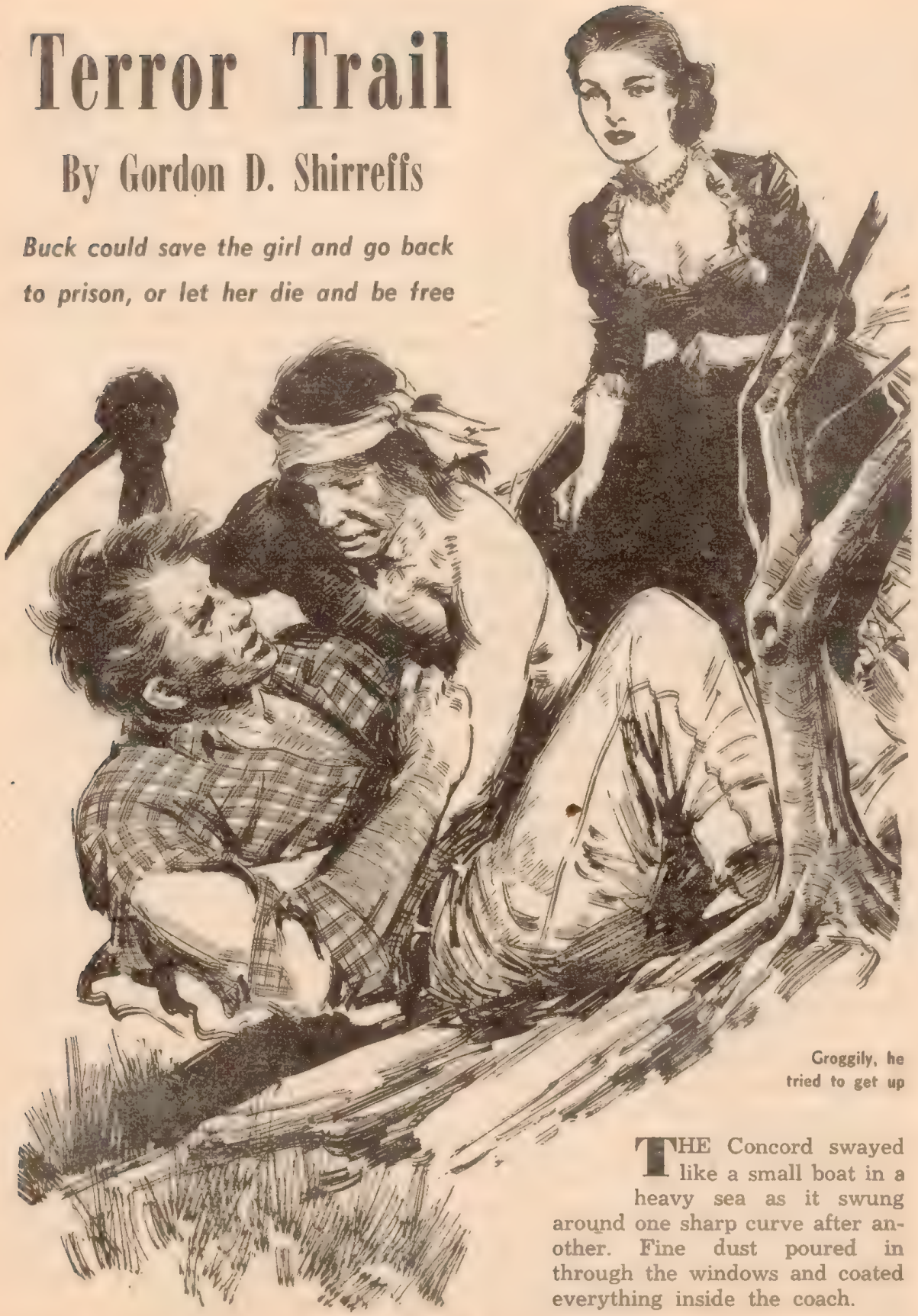
In a drab little bedroom there, Jim Hatfield did what he could for Irish Bob Durfee's head injury. Then he sat down with a bottle, to relax himself, comfort Irene, and wait for Milt Travers.

Another mission was completed.

Terror Trail

By Gordon D. Shirreffs

Buck could save the girl and go back to prison, or let her die and be free



Groggily, he tried to get up

THE Concord swayed like a small boat in a heavy sea as it swung around one sharp curve after another. Fine dust poured in through the windows and coated everything inside the coach.

The girl seated across from Buck Echols opened her eyes and looked directly at him. She was a pretty girl, and the scarf she had placed across her mouth and nose accentuated her large, clear eyes. Buck became acutely aware of the trail filth of his own clothing and the sour sweat smell of him. Worst of all was the feeling of the handcuff on his right wrist, attaching him to phlegmatic Charley Bellew's left wrist.

Buck was on the road to Yuma Pen at last, after three years of dodging the law.

The girl—Buck had heard her called Beth Hughes—knew all about him. She had heard the excited talk in the stage office at Mohawk Wells. "Buck Echols," they had said. "The hombre who killed Dandy Horsham up at Wickenburg three years ago! Caught at last!"

The man sitting beside Beth leaned forward to tap Charley on the knee. "There was a jail break at Yuma two weeks ago," he said, with a sly smile. "Guard broke it up with a Gatling. Shot eight cons to doll rags."

Charley shifted a little in his seat. "So?"

The man, a mine employee from Wickenburg, eyed Buck, then spoke to Charley again. "Yuma is a hell-hole," he said. "Gets hot as Hades there in the summer. Maybe you heard the story about the soldier who died there last summer?"

Charley worked his unlit cigar back to the left side of his mouth. "Can't say as I have."

"Seems as though he died and went to hell. Damned if he didn't find it too chilly down there after being stationed at Fort Yuma." The man paused for a moment. "His ghost comes back the next night to Fort Yuma, so's he could draw his blankets again. Haw-w-w!"

Buck looked out of the window as he heard the tag end of the old story. The mountains were tawny against the horizon. A haze softened their angular outlines. There was no sign of life on the desert between the stage road and the heights. Just cactus, ocotillo and creosote bushes, swaying in the hot wind.

HE HAD heard plenty of stories about Yuma Pen. A hell-hole of cells blasted from solid rock; of scorching summer heat; of guards, tough as hickory and whang leather, who broke a man's spirit by confining him in the notorious Snake Den.

There was a deep sickness in Buck. Outwardly he still carried off the part of the nerveless outlaw, but within him there was a crawling feeling, green and cold, which had come to haunt him when he had been sentenced to twenty years in the Arizona Territorial Prison, and had been with him ever since.

"Sometimes them cons go insane," the mining man was saying. "Then they throw them in the loony cell. I seen it once. Ain't nothing but a hole in the living rock, hardly long enough for a man. A loony con ain't got nothing to do in there but beat his head against the rock and wish to God he'd never been born."

Buck turned to eye the garrulous man. The man was riding him, showing off his coarse wit to the silent girl beside him.

"You seem to know quite a bit about Yuma, especially the insane cell," Buck said quietly. "Maybe you spent a little time in there yourself."

The man whitened. He gripped a loop strap as though to pull himself up. "Why, you damned killer, you!"

Charley leaned forward and placed a huge hand on the angry man's chest. "Just set there, friend. You've been looking for a rise out of Echols. You got it. Now set there and shut up. If you can't talk about anything but Yuma Pen, don't talk at all."

"I'm a citizen! I pay taxes! You've no right to talk to me like that just because you wear a tin badge."

Charley tilted his head to one side. "You just make a complaint when you get to Yuma. Until then you keep quiet."

The girl looked out of the window. "Are there mines in these mountains?" she asked quietly.

"None that I know of," said Charley, as he relit his cigar. "Why?"

"There is smoke rising from that hill

a few miles from here."

Charley stared at her, then suddenly flipped his lucifer out of the window as it burned his fingers. He leaned forward and stared at the dun hill to the southeast.

Buck eyed it, too. A tendril of smoke *was* rising from it, to ravel out in the hot wind. It had not been there a few minutes before when he had looked that way.

Charley turned to Buck. "What do you think, Echols?"

Buck looked at the girl. She was watching him closely.

"Prospector maybe, Charley," Buck said. "Brush fire. No Apaches around here."

Charley could see the lie in Buck's face. He sat back and chewed at his cigar.

The mining man had paled. "There was trouble with the Mohave-Apaches over to Agua Fria Springs," he said. "They killed three teamsters and shot up a mail wagon."

"Shut up," said Charley.

The coach swayed down a slope, ground across a pebbly dry wash with a grinding of wheels and clucking of sand boxes and took the rise with a rush to enter a low-walled pass. It was narrow and brushy and the track paralleled a deep, rocky gully.

There was a sharp crack, clear above the noise of the coach. It *could* be the driver's whip, thought Buck. There was a sound as though a stick had been slapped into thick mud. The mining man sagged back in his seat. A three foot cane shaft transfixed his neck, the bloody tip of the arrow only inches from the girl's face.

"Apaches!" cried Charley, drew his Colt and cocked it.

The driver yelled at his team. The shotgun messenger fired his shotgun. Powder smoke whipped into the careening coach. Wood splintered as a slug slapped into the paneling of the Concord.

Another arrow slashed through the wood and pinned Charley's coat to the side of the coach. A violent lurch of the Concord threw Buck atop the marshal. The mining man pitched to the floor.

GUNFIRE flamed from a clump of mesquite beside the road, and Buck saw the coach driver pitch from his high seat into the brush. The Concord slewed around a turn in the road and the shotgun messenger dropped like a bundle of old clothing into the gully. Shots slammed back and forth in the pass.

The girl screamed as Charley jerked in his seat, then sagged forward. Buck snatched awkwardly with his left hand for the marshal's Colt, then felt the coach wheels slip over the edge of the gully. For a fraction of a second the Concord swayed for balance on its thoroughbraces, then went over to land with a splintering crash amongst the rocks. Something smashed against Buck's skull, and he seemed to plunge deep into a pitchy black abyss. . . .

The odor of smoke aroused Buck Echols. He opened his eyes, wincing as his head touched wood. For a moment he could not identify the dim, smoky place where he lay, then he realized that he had fallen through the open door of the coach and that it was now above him, lying on its side. His right arm was suspended awkwardly above him.

Whoops and the thud of hooves sounded above the crackling of flames—and icy realization came to Buck with an impact that sickened him. He was trapped beneath the burning coach in a space left clear because the coach had fallen across a hollow in the floor of the rocky gully. He tugged at his right arm. But the handcuff still held.

"Marshal Bellew is dead," a voice close behind Buck said. He turned his head quickly, and looked into Beth Hughes' drawn face. "They are *all* dead," she added tonelessly.

He gripped her by the arm. "Shut up!" he snapped at her. "Apaches have ears like dogs!"

Her eyes were wide in her dusty face as she looked at his upthrust arm. "You're

trapped," she said.

The coach creaked as someone got up on it. There was a thudding sound, repeated several times, then the coach creaked again. Acrid smoke drifted down on Buck and Beth Hughes. Buck knew what had just happened. Icy sweat soaked his shirt. A warrior had braved the fire to smash in the dead men's head's to keep their vengeful spirits from haunting their slayers.

Trace chains jingled and shod hooves thudded on the rocky floor of the gully. Buck pulled at his trapped arm and looked under the edge of the upset coach. An Apache was driving off those stagecoach horses that had survived the fall.

Buck pulled at his arm again. The handcuff cut into his wrist. He pulled once more. It was getting warm beneath the coach.

He said to Beth, "We've got to get out from under here. We'll be burned to death when that fire really gets hold."

He stood up and thrust his head and shoulders up into the coach. The mining man lay doubled over the body of Charley Bellow. His head had a curious lopsided look where the Apache war club had done its work. Buck tried to get his free hand into Charley's right hand pants pocket where he had carried the handcuff key. It was impossible. The other corpse was wedged against Charley's right leg.

Buck tugged desperately until the sweat poured down his body and his trapped wrist was raw and wet with blood. He felt panic rise up in his soul.

A hand gripped his free arm. "Wait! You won't get free that way."

He stared into Beth's calm eyes. "What can I do?" he asked hoarsely.

She stood up and looked into the coach. "Have you got a knife?" she asked.

"No." Buck gripped her by the wrist. "Charley had a clasp knife in his coat pocket."

She moved quickly. Buck heard the knife click open, then felt the movement of the cuff linking him to the dead man. Beth coughed. She worked faster. Buck felt something warm and wet on his right hand. She coughed again. Smoke swirled down beside Buck. It was getting hotter.

SUDDENLY she gripped his wrist and pulled hard. He was free! The knife dropped down beside him. The blade was bloody.

Beth crouched down beside him. "We can't stay under here," she said.

Buck picked up the knife and crawled to the back of the coach. There was hardly enough room for her to get under the edge of the coach, much less him. There was no sign of life in the sun-washed gully.

"We'll have to chance it," he said. For a moment her eyes held his. "Have you got a gun?" he asked quietly.

"Yes." She took a single-barreled derringer from her coat pocket.

Buck looked at the little weapon. Then he gripped her by the shoulders. "Crawl out. If they see you, don't hesitate. Do you understand?"

She looked down at the deadly little weapon. She nodded. Buck braced his back under the coach and lifted. It moved. He could feel his muscles crack as the coach slid a little. The girl dropped flat and worked her way under the edge of the coach. Buck caught a glimpse of a well-shaped leg and a fluffy petticoat, then she was gone.

He squatted and waited. There was no sound outside. He closed his eyes, expecting to hear a whoop of discovery. He thought desperately, God, make her kill herself rather than fall into their greasy, blood-soaked hands!

"They've gone!" she called. Her hands scrabbled at the hard earth.

Buck dropped on his belly and helped her, digging at the hard *caliche* with his knife. The blade snapped. Smoke hung about him. The noise of crackling wood and leaping flames came louder. He forced his shoulders into the opening and tried to work his way through. A tongue of flame seared his left hand.

"I can't make it!" he said hoarsely.

She gripped him by his right wrist and braced her feet against the coach. He

pushed with his shoulders and beat his feet against the hard earth. The coach shifted a little and he squirmed forward. The odor of burning cloth and flesh came to him and for one dreadful moment he thought it was his own. Then he was free, rolling on the ground to put out the flame smoldering in his left trouser leg.

He stood up and gripped Beth by the arm, rushing her into a dense thicket of catclaw which tore crully at their flesh. He did not stop until they crouched beneath an overhanging rock ledge. He felt thirst claw at his throat with husking hands.

"We'll stay here until it's dark," he said over his shoulder. "Thanks for cutting me loose. That took guts."

"My father was a contract-surgeon with the Army at Whipple Barracks," she said quietly. "I learned a great deal from him."

Buck sat down with his back against the rock and looked at the dangling wrist iron. Poor Charley. He hadn't been a bad hombre for a lawman.

Buck's sudden freedom seemed to work on him like wine. He was only about fifty miles from the Border, and even though he might have to traverse the fearful, waterless Camino del Diablo, the Devil's Road, he would take the chance.

There *might* be water at Tinajas Altas, where natural cavities in the granite held rainwater for most of the year. There was a chance he could steal a horse at Antelope Hill. Suddenly he eyed the girl. She was sitting with her head bowed and her hands in the lap of her torn and dusty skirt. She had been through a hell of a lot. If it hadn't been for her he would be barbecuing now beneath the burning coach.

He could hear the crackling of the seasoned wood and smell the smoke and the thick odor of burning flesh and cloth. When the coach was found, an area of ashes and blackened iron in the gully, it would be believed that Buck Echols had died in the flames along with the others. The one catch was Beth Huges. *She* knew he was still alive.

SHE RAISED her head as thought she had read Buck's thoughts. "What will you do now?" she asked quietly.

He shrugged. "Sit tight until dark."

"And then?"

He hesitated. He had never been a good liar where women were concerned. "We're not in the clear yet," he said.

"You mean they might come back?"

He nodded. "They might come back before dark. They probably won't come back after sundown. They don't like the dead."

She eyed him. "You won't have to go to Yuma now," she said.

Buck looked away. The closest town was Antelope Wells, on the newly completed Southern Pacific, about twenty-five miles from where they were. He could leave her there and push on to the Border, but then the alarm would be out. He could leave her at the stage road and get to Antelope Hill on his own, but she would never get through the Apaches to the railroad.

Buck stood up and looked through the brush. A pall of smoke rose from the fiercely burning Concord. The fire had probably started from Charley's cigar. It was a damned good thing for Buck it *had* started, or the Apaches would have torn the coach apart looking for loot. Beth would have been cowering, shrieking by now, a white girl prisoner in the hands of the raiders.

Buck was aware of a strange thought that had crept into his mind. He almost wished she had died in the attack. He would have been in the clear then. The Apaches might come back after the coach was through burning. They might not have known how many passengers were in it. But if they had known—

Buck thrust the thought from his mind as a sour taste came up into the back of his throat. He had his chance now to clear out for the Border. Instead of spending twenty years at Yuma, burning in the summer and freezing in the winter, a caged animal amongst other criminals, he could live like a man in Mexico.

He did not dare look at Beth, for fear

she would read the chilling thoughts in his mind. . . .

In the darkness preceding the rise of the moon Buck Echols scouted through the gully. He felt almost naked without a gun of one sort or another. He had wrapped the short handcuff chain across his knuckles in a crude sort of knuckle duster, but he had no illusions about fighting clear if the Apaches found him.

A cold wind whispered through the gully. It stirred the ashes of the coach, showing a red eye now and then as an ember was uncovered. The odor of burnt wood, cloth, leather and flesh clung in the gully. The body of the shotgun messenger lay where it had fallen. It had been stripped and hideously multilated.

There was no use looking for a dropped weapon, but Buck did find the driver's empty canteen.

Buck went back to the thicket and motioned for Beth to follow him. He led the way up the gully, across the rutted stage road and into an arroyo that cut deep into the flank of a rounded hill. It was slow going, for there was little light, and the arroyo was thick with brush, and treacherous underfoot. Despite the cool of the desert night, Buck's shirt was soaked with sweat.

Time and time again he stopped to listen, sniffing the breeze as though to detect the rancid odor of Apache. When the moon tipped the Gila Bend Mountains, far to the east, he stopped to let Beth rest. She dropped in her tracks. Her skirt was badly torn and she had pinned her shirt waist together with thorns.

Buck gripped her by the shoulder. "Stay here," he said softly.

She lifted her head and eyed him steadily. "Where are you going?"

He felt a flush of heat through his body. "To backtrail a little. Did you think I was going to leave you here?"

"You might."

Buck almost cursed. "I could have made twice the time without you!" he shot out at her.

"Why didn't you then?" Her steady eyes held his.

He turned on a heel. "Sit here and wonder whether I'll be back," he said, and walked back down the trail.

He was instantly sorry, for it was a lonely place, haunted by the ghosts of the slain, and cold with fear. He looked down into the gully. Shadowy figures were riding on the stage road. He could feel tension in the air.

APACHES! A file of them riding to the west. There was no sound from them. It was almost as though they were phantoms haunting the blood-soaked pass. Buck watched them halt their mounts and look toward where the coach had been destroyed. It took courage for them to come in there again, when they believed the spirits of the dead to be haunting the place hoping for vegeance on their killers.

Buck suddenly stiffened. Three warriors had kneed their ponies out of the brush, at almost the spot where he and Beth had been hiding. They joined the others. The wind picked up the murmur of their slurring speech. Some of the warriors looked up the slopes of the pass. Buck felt cold in every fiber of his body. They had found *something!*

He turned on a heel and walked quickly back to the girl. Come on," he said.

"What is it?"

"Never mind."

"I'm worn out. I can't keep on."

He leaned close to her. "There are Apaches down in the pass," he said.

"They won't find us, will they?"

"How should I know? They are like bloodhounds. If they know we escaped they'll tear the hills apart looking for us."

"You have a better chance without me. I can't keep on at the pace you've been setting." Her voice was thick with weariness and despair.

He gripped her by the shoulders. His left hand touched smooth bare flesh where the shirt waist had been ripped away. "Have you ever heard of what they do to women?" he asked fiercely. "Have

you ever seen the bodies of the white women they have caught? You'd die on your feet running if you had. I'm going on. If you want to get away from a side trip to hell before you die, you'd better make damned sure you are close behind me!"

He hurried up the slope without looking back. He heard the scrape of her feet on the rocks as he pushed his way through a mesquite clump. She was following him. . . .

Buck found the shallow cave just before midnight. Beth swayed as she stumbled into it and dropped to the floor. He went back to the mouth of the cave and worked his way higher up the slope. The moon was waning over the western mountains. Below him he could see the long gradual slope up which they had come in the hours since he had seen the Apaches. There was no sign of life, but those bloody marauders could move silently and unseen until rifle shot or bow twang revealed them.

It was a silent, shadowy land that Buck saw, brooding in its loneliness. He sat down on a rock and wiped his dry lips. They were still a hell of a long way from the railroad. She had held him back in the hours when he had led the way from that pass of death. It would have been easy to go on alone. Yet he could not forget how she had cut him loose from a dead peace officer. That had taken guts of the kind that few women, and not many men would have had. He owed her a debt. He'd have to chance getting her to safety and getting to Sonora alone.

He looked to the west. The Colorado was off there in the dimness. Farther south was Yuma with the penitentiary squatting on the heights above the town, holding behind its walls those men whom Arizona deemed unfit to associate with their fellowmen.

Twenty years! With a few years off for good behavior he would still be in his forties, but a broken man. Damn Dandy Horsham for egging him into gun play. Damn *himself* for his temper and his skill with a sixgun. In any other part of the territory Buck might have got off with a few years of prison. But Dandy had had too many friends in Wickenburg gambling circles and Maricopa County.

Dandy and Buck had both been to blame for the incidents leading up to the sudden flare of sixguns in lamplit Tegner Street. Buck remembered how he had been forced to ride for his life from Dandy's amigos, destroying his chances of facing it out and trying to clear himself of the charge of murder which hung over his head.

HIDING out had forced him to steal to live. He knew he should have left Arizona long ago, but some perverse quality in his makeup had kept him right where he was hunted by every lawman in the territory.

Beth was sleeping when Buck returned to the cave. He sat down at the mouth of the cave. It would be easy to pull out now and head for the Border. He had to think of himself.

He dozed a little, then suddenly was wide awake, staring to the dimness down the slope. Three years of running from the law had whetted his instincts to razor-sharpness.

There was no sound except the rustling of the night wind in the brush. He sat still, hardly daring to breathe. There *was* something alien on that dark slope! Something that was hunting. Buck wrapped the chain about his knuckles and stood up. He eased himself down the slope, working off to one side, silently, like a lean ghost. He stood there for a time, fifty yards from the cave, and tested the night with every sense.

It was then he felt, rather than saw, the movement fifty feet from him. Two bushy heads appeared, followed by thick-chested upper bodies. It was though some evil spell materialized them from the bowels of the earth. They were looking up at the cave.

Buck sank to his knees and eyed the two warriors through a cresote bush. The wind picked up soft, slurring Apache.

They knew something was up there in the cave. Buck felt cold sweat soak his shirt beneath his arms.

He thought, time to pull out. God help her!

He turned to work his way farther down the slope, half expecting to hear her screams or the crack of the little derringer. Suddenly he stopped and lay flat, pressing his unshaven cheek against the hard earth. She had saved his life when he had been trapped beneath the coach. She had shown real courage during their flight from the pass.

But Buck shook his head. It was death to go back up that slope. What could one unarmed man do? Nothing! He would throw away his own life. It wasn't *his* fault that she was up there alone. But other thoughts persisted. He had sunk damned low, lying there sweating with fear, when a white girl was being stalked by two bloody handed red killers.

He stood up and tightened the chain about his right hand. Suddenly he went up the slope, stooping to pick up a rock with his left hand.

In the faint light of the dying moon he saw them, not ten feet from the cave, bent slightly from the waist as they tried to probe the darkness with their eyes. Ten feet from them his right boot rolled on a stone. There was a sibilant hiss from one of the bucks. They whirled.

Buck closed in, swinging his lethal right fist. It crunched against the foremost warrior's jaw, smashing bone. The buck grunted and went to his knees. The other warrior whipped out a knife. It slashed toward Buck, ripping his shirt with its tip. Buck threw the rock. As it thudded against the buck's deep chest, Buck smashed a boot against the head of the Apache on the ground, and closed with the knife wielder.

The stench of their bodies rose about them as they strained chest to chest. Buck slammed home his mailed right fist, battering at the Apache's painted face. Blood splashed against Buck's own face. The knife ripped a gash up his left bicep. Their feet clattered on the loose stones of the slope.

There was a cry from the cave then, and Beth Hughes ran out just as Buck went down, falling back over the first warrior he had dropped. His head smashed against rock.

Groggily he tried to get up. The knife slashed his shirt again. His upthrust feet caught the knifer in the groin. As he bent forward, Beth shoved him from behind. Buck's armored fist smashed home behind the worrior's left ear, driving him down the slope. As Buck got to his knees the other Apache whipped out his short reserve knife. It sank home in Beth's side. She swayed and went down.

THEN BUCK was on the back of the warrior like a lean cat. Down the slope they went, rolling over and over, cutting themsevles on the sharp stones, battering and slashing at each other. Suddenly Buck was on top and his fists battered the buck's face into a semblance of nothing human. When Buck got to his feet he was retching violently.

The Apache down the slope was on his hands and knees now. Buck picked up a heavy rock and slammed it home. He stood there watching the body slide down into the darkness below with a rush of stones and gravel. Then he worked his way wearily up to the girl.

Beth was down, holding her left side. She fainted as Buck pulled her hand away. He worked swiftly and desperately, glancing often behind him, half expecting to see other enemy forms appear. The knife had sunk deep into her white flesh. He staunched the flow of blood and bound the bandage tight with her scarf, then stood up.

He *had* to get her to a sawbones now. She had saved his life again!

He picked up a brassbellied Colt that had been dropped by one of the now dead warriors and cocked it, working his way silently down the slope. A quarter of a mile from the cave he found the two Apaches' horses. They wore the stageline brand, and they whinnied as the familiar odor of a white man came to

them, rank as it was. . . .

False dawn touched the eastern sky when Buck drew rein and looked back toward the heights from which he and Beth had come. They were still three miles from the railroad. It had been slow progress, for it had been necessary for Buck to support the weak girl throughout the ride, and time and time again she had passed out.

There was a trace of lighter shadow at the base of a cone-shaped hill. Buck studied it, then looked at Beth. It wasn't shadow he saw; it was dust. Dust from the hooves of Apache horses pursuing them.

Buck gripped the girl by the shoulder. He had lashed her thighs to the crude Apache saddle but there was a constant fear in him that she would fall from the horse. He kicked his own mount with his heels and rode for the railroad.

They were miles from the nearest settlement. And the dust behind them was getting closer! The Apaches were making twice the time they were.

A mile from the railroad Buck prepared to make a stand. He checked the loads in the heavy Spencer carbine he had found slung from the horse he rode. Looking back, he could distinguish individual warriors now, quirting their horses on. The dawn light picked out red headbands and the brass trim of weapons. There were at least ten of them.

Suddenly Buck swung around. Something had come to him on the dawn wind. A melancholy sound from the east. For a moment he almost forgot the pursuing Apaches as the eerie sound came again, rushing toward him on the wind.

A locomotive whistle, sending its lonely cry across the desert!

Buck Echols beat at the girl's horse with the butt of his carbine and rode hard toward the tracks. To the east a wisp of smoke trailed against the lightening sky. Then Buck saw something clear against the dun hills. The flash of a headlight against the darkness.

"Thank God!" he yelled.

He halted Beth's horse in a hollow near the tracks and eased her to the ground. Then he dropped flat behind the edge of the hollow and thrust his carbine forward. He fired twice, driving the Apaches under cover. The locomotive was rattling toward them now, trailing smoke and sparks.

Buck fired again, and then ran toward the tracks, hoping to God they would see him clearly enough! Rifles cracked behind him and slugs sang thinly through the air as he stood exposed on the tracks. Then the whistle of the locomotive shrilled out, again and again, and he heard the noise of the brakes grinding hard.

He swung, and opened fire on the nearest Apaches. The train ground to a steamy halt. Guns opened fire from the cab and some of the cars. Suddenly the Apaches vanished as though spirited away.

Buck was beside Beth when the train crew reached him.

"She's been wounded," Buck said over his shoulder.

"There's a doc aboard," a trainman told him.

HE WATCHED the men lift Beth Hughes aboard. A hard hand gripped his right shoulder, he turned and looked into the face of one of the passengers. A star was pinned on the man's black coat.

"Buck Echols," he said, "I don't know how you escaped, but I'm arresting you now."

For a moment Buck was tempted to fight it out and run for his horse. Half a dozen hard faces were studying him. Hands rested on Colts. The dangling handcuff chain had damned him without a chance. He dropped the Spencer and nodded.

"I'm Echols, all right," he said quietly. "I didn't escape, though. The stagecoach was ambushed north of here. Charley Bellew and another passenger were killed along with the driver and the shotgun messenger. The girl you put on the train cut me loose from Charley. The Apaches trailed us."

The lawman scratched his jaw as he listened. Finally he mumbled, "I'm Joe Wingate, U. S. Marshal for this district." He looked out toward the dust streaming from the hooves of the retreating Apache horses. "Seems to me you had a good chance to pull leather for the Border, Echols."

"Yeah," Buck said quietly, "I guess I did. . . ."

Later, as the train rattled toward Yuma, Buck felt the old sickness come over him again. The doctor who had attended Beth came to treat Buck's wounds.

"You saved her life, son," he said quietly. "At the cost of your freedom. Maybe you didn't do so badly after all. Her father is a personal friend of the governor. He and I served together at Whipple Barracks for a time." He looked up at Buck. "How long was your sentence?"

"Twenty years."

The sawbones tightened a bandage and looked at Marshal Wingate. "I don't think *this* man will ever serve twenty years. Do you, Wingate?"

Wingate shook his head. "I always thought Echols' trial was fixed. There are a hell of a lot of men in Arizona who knew Dandy Horsham was a troublemaker." He leaned forward. "You watch yourself in Yuma Pen, son. Keep your nose clean. I've got a feeling you won't be in there long."

Buck looked back at Beth. She was asleep. He wondered if he'd ever see her again. That thought alone would make his days in Yuma easier. Somehow he *knew* she would see him again. For the first time in three years he felt as though he had a fighting chance to live a full life again.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

EL DIABLO'S TREASURE

A Jim Hatfield novel that takes the Lone Wolf deep into the mountains of Mexico on the trail of a treasure that has brought only death!

By JACKSON COLE

and

WILD NIGHT IN DODGE

A Hard-Hitting Novelet by FRANK P. CASTLE

He smashed into Tasker and tore the man out of the saddle

THE RAIDERS

By J. L. BOUMA

A pretty young widow had no business in a fight as rough and dirty as this, John Carr figured

JOHN CARR first saw her in the doorway of the stage, a slender young woman frowning down at the wheel-and-hoof-churned muck that separated her from the hotel veranda. Ore wagons, rigs, riders, and men on foot wallowed along the street, and teamsters cursed and bellowed.

Rain pocked the muck and glazed the windows of the coach. The jagged, rocky mountains that hemmed in this mining settlement reflected distant jabs of lightning and shouldered sullen rolls

of thunder.

Nothing unusual, of course. It was late fall, and Carr took the seasons for granted. But still a man has to consider the weather where it concerns his own movements, and Carr was thinking of his four wagons and a six-day trek to his mine. He was thinking that the rain smelled of snow, and that winter waited for no man. And that he was shy two miners and a cook, and that it took money, not promises, to buy whisky and tobacco.

But neither were these worries unusual. A man working on a shoestring expected them, and did the best he could. For there was always the dream of a big bonanza to bolster him. He could forget the hard years, the filth, the freezing cold of winter and the heat of summer, the weeks of useless toil, of salt-side and sourdough biscuits three times a day and second-hand gear that always broke down at crucial moments, and couldn't be replaced.

In the dream the gold was always there beyond the facing. The next dynamite charge would bare it, the next pick stroke would bring it in view.

But the dream was a promise, too, and a man gets tired and begins to wonder. That's what had happened to John Carr and Dan Malone, until they'd taken a year's lease on the old Edmund claim. A hundred dollars and a handshake, and one more try. Shoot and muck and hoist and take your samples to the nearest assayer.

And then knowing they had struck it, finally. Not high-grade, but paying ore, hard to get at but worth the effort.

The Melody Mine, Dan called it, in honor of the young bride he had left in Denver. The young widow now, because a faulty stick of dynamite had blown when it shouldn't, and Daniel Malone was no more. Shy Dan, who blushed every time he mentioned Melody's name.

BUT NO matter what happened, a man had to be practical. The same charge that had blown Dan to glory, had torn hell out of the hoist and the cribbing. It had taken Carr two weeks and a lot of running around to find gear that might, or might not, last through the winter. Only thing left to do was pray, as Oddie had told him, and Oddie was just about right. Oddie—Oddie Freeman, the last man he had left to work the mine.

There was another answer, of course. Though it was fairly easy to forget Jay Walsh's offer to take over Carr's half of the mine, and pay a handsome profit to boot. Carr had refused for more reasons than one, but mainly because there was more than paying ore in that mine now—there was the blood of the man who had been his friend and partner. You could not sell something like that.

So, troubles being what they were, Carr saw nothing for him to do but shoulder them aside and keep going. He'd been in the hotel, seeing what he could do about hiring help, and not having any luck, when he had seen the young woman standing in the doorway of the stage.

She roused Carr's interest. For women, outside of those working in the honky-tonks, were as rare as peach blossoms in the Colorado mining camps. Young and pretty ones were even rarer, and this one in the green dress and the dark cape, with the frilly bonnet set atop her black hair, gave Carr much the same feeling he'd had on first reading the assayer's report.

She was small, but from the way that dress snugged her, all woman, and the stubborn look on her small, heart-shaped face checked his stride.

She said angrily, "That fool driver!" and lifted her skirt to take the step down, exposing a high-buttoned shoe and a shapely calf. Carr forgot his worries at once. Three long strides and he swooped her up in his arms, and as quickly deposited her on the veranda.

She had started to protest, her eyes blazing, her small clenched fist whacking his shoulder. Now she faced him, straightening her skirt, her cheeks rosy.

She said crossly, "Well, as long as it's

done—" She gave him a quick scrutiny. "My carpet-bag is on the seat. Get it, please."

Carr hadn't expected an outburst of thanks, but he resented the way she looked at him, and the way she spoke. He knew he hadn't shaved in three days and that his wet, heavy clothing smelled of sweat and tobacco. Nevertheless he got her carpet-bag and reticule from the stage and carried them into the lobby.

She took a coin from her handbag, saying crisply, "Thank you."

He stared at the coin, and the growl that came out of him sounded like low thunder. "Save it for a rainy day," he said, and strode outside.

He was still raging as he sloshed through the mud toward the empty lot behind the freight depot. . .

Carr saw her again later that evening, after the trouble at the wagons. He hadn't expected that kind of trouble so near town. Wagon train raiders usually tried their dirty work when they deemed themselves safe from pursuit. So it was with gut-tightening surprise that he saw the struggling figures through the dusky murk.

There were four or five. Oddie Freeman was the center of the struggle, and Oddie was roaring defiance, and his heavy fists were swinging methodically at the nearest target. Carr saw this as he ran over, shrugging out of his heavy coat. And he saw the man slop liquid on one of the wagons, and then hunch to strike a match.

It wasn't all clear to Carr, and there wasn't time to find out. He caught the man with the match at neck and crotch, flung him down and smashed a fist into the startled face. That was enough. Carr threw himself into the thick of the fight.

IT DIDN'T last long. A sharp kick in the stomach sent one man scurrying into the darkness. Oddie lifted another in his great arms and threw him bodily through the air. Someone yelled, and the rest took flight.

Carr put his back against a wagon wheel, breathing hard. "What the hell happened?"

"They came all at once," Oddie growled. "Didn't say a word. Damn good thing you got here in time."

Carr went over and picked up the five-gallon tin the man he had seen had dropped. He sniffed deep. "Kerosene, by God! They meant to burn those wagons."

"A hell of a note," Oddie growled. "Wonder who's behind it?"

Carr shook his head grimly. He checked the four wagons. They were loaded with mining gear, with foodstuff—barrels of flour and sugar, sacked potatoes and beans, salt pork and bacon, coffee, dried apples, a small keg of whiskey and plenty of tobacco. Enough of everything to see a half-dozen men through the coming winter.

Oddie said, "You hire any help?"

"No," said Carr.

"We should be rolling in the morning, before she begins to snow. She's likely already snowing up at the pass."

Carr was feeling edgy. "Damn it, Oddie, don't you think I know that? But the two of us can't handle four wagons. I'll try Walsh's tonight. Maybe we'll have a little luck for a change."

"Let's hope so," Oddie growled. "Me, I'm loading my sawed-off. They're welcome to try again, but they'll be met by a load of buckshot."

Carr washed up and scraped the whiskers off his face, and he changed to dry clothes. Walking to town, he thought of the two men he had left at the mine, and what a headache it was hiring miners to work winters at the *Melody*. For once up there after the first heavy snows, they could expect to stay, like it or not. To hell with it, was the usual answer. There were enough jobs open closer to town, where a man wouldn't miss his Saturday night drunk.

Jay Walsh's Miner's Comfort was the biggest structure in town. This Walsh mined in more ways than one, Carr thought wryly, as he entered the place. The fellow dug it out of the ground at his Jayhawk Mine, and he cleaned a man's pockets in his saloon and gambling house. He understood a man's hunger and knew how to play on it and line his pockets.

Carr stood inside the doorway and looked over the crowded room. Girls in gaudy attire mingled with miners. A nickelodeon tossed a jangling tune into the uproar. First, drinks on the house, then games of chance in back. Dust, nuggets or cash, Walsh wasn't particular what he took in. There were more ways than one to skin a cat, and he knew all of them.

Not, Carr thought, that you could blame the man. But that didn't mean you had to like him. Think of the devil, Carr thought, for there he came, a lean, black-eyed man with a cigar between his white teeth and, as always, the man called Tasker following him like a shadow.

Looking at them, Carr thought grimly that it was too bad he hadn't got hold of one of the jaspers that tried to burn the wagons, and made him talk. It might have been an interesting conversation, and maybe—just maybe—Jay Walsh's name would have been mentioned.

Only thing, a man had to be certain. He had to be damn certain before he gathered a committee of miners to act.

Walsh took the cigar from between his teeth and said, "Well, Carr, I thought you'd pulled out. What's holding you up? Haven't changed your mind about selling out, have you?"

"No," said Carr. "There was a little trouble tonight, but it hasn't stopped us. Or did you already get the report?"

WALSH smiled faintly. "Only a fool runs into a stone wall," he murmured. "And you could save yourself a lot of grief by working with me."

Carr studied the saloonman and gambler. "How's that?"

"It's just possible that we may end up partners," Walsh told him. "And if we do, I want the mine worked proper."

Carr said softly, "Where do you get that 'partner' business?"

Walsh shrugged and contemplated his cigar. "Call it a thought." He looked up. "When do you plan to roll?"

"That's none of your damn' business," Carr said bluntly. He took a step forward. "Now you listen to me. If ever again there's an attempt made to stop us, I'll hold you to blame, and I'm not funning."

Tasker moved around and took hold of Carr's arm. He was a wide, flat man with a pale face and small pig eyes.

"Be careful how you talk to the boss," he snapped.

Carr looked at him. "Get your dirty paws off me," he said, and waited. Tasker grinned wickedly and merely gripped him harder. Carr looked deliberately at the long bar mirror, at the fancy array of bottles. "All right," he breathed. "This joint needs cleaning out—"

He jerked his arm free and clubbed Tasker on the side of the jaw, staggering him. There was a sudden hush in the room, then the floor shook as miners surged forward to see the fun. Carr looked at Walsh and laughed.

"Your move," he said.

Walsh's mouth hardened. This was the fuse that led to the explosion, and he knew it. Let a fight get started and others would join in, and nothing would stop them. It would take about ten minutes to wreck the place and everything in it.

Tasker, his mouth bloody, his pale eyes filmy with hatred, started for Carr. Walsh blocked his way, saying sharply, "Stop it!" He lifted his voice. "Belly up, boys! Drinks on the house!"

There was hoarse laughter, a general movement to the bar.

Carr turned to the door and saw Howard Barlow, the lawyer, ducking through the crowd toward him. Walsh and Tasker had moved to the bar.

"I want to see you, Carr," Barlow called.

Carr nodded and went out. He waited there, taking the twist of a cigar from his pocket and lighting it. Barlow came outside, a small dapper man with shrewd eyes. He had handled the Melody mine lease, and had taken care of the legal work concerned with Dan Malone's death.

Barlow said, "I've been looking for you. Did you know that Dan's widow is in town?"

Carr stared at him. "Hell, no. The little black-haired woman that came in on the stage this afternoon?"

"That's her." Barlow frowned. "I thought you said—"

"Never mind," Carr told him curtly. "It's getting so nothing much surprises me. What the hell's she doing here?"

"You better let her tell you that," the lawyer said. "Come on, let's go."

Mrs. Melody Malone opened the door of her room at Barlow's knock. They went inside and Carr scowled at her faintly, wondering if she'd recognize him. He knew little about her, but had gathered the impression from Dan that she was as close to being an angel as a human could be. One man's opinion, he had thought at the time. Dan had been married to her only a month before leaving to seek his fortune.

Barlow introduced them, and when she really looked at Carr a flicker of recognition crossed her dark eyes. "Why, you're —" she said, and a flush spread up her throat and darkened her cheeks, but she continued to look at him steadily. Then she smiled and offered her hand. "We never learn without first making mistakes," she said.

BARLOW, his shrewd eyes puzzled, looked from her to Carr. "You've met?"

"Well—" Melody Malone said, and laughed.

Carr grinned at her, half wondering how a shy, quiet man like Dan Malone had ever won her. This was a girl who stood on her own two feet, who had courage enough to admit a wrong.

They sat down. Barlow said, "Mrs. Malone is interested in hearing about the mine, Carr."

Carr said, "Everything's all right, isn't it?"

"Of course. It's all settled according to law. But—" The lawyer glanced questioningly at Melody.

"I'm afraid it's a matter of money, Mr. Carr," said Melody. "You see—well, Dan put all he had into the mines, and there haven't been any returns to speak of. So I—"

Carr said, "There will be. You want to remember that we worked most of the summer without hitting pay dirt. Then when we did strike it, Dan was killed. Now three men have quit on me, but as soon as I hire replacements we'll be set to go. We'll dump our ore this winter and haul it to the mill come spring. Meanwhile, we'll just have to make out."

"Your lease expires the first of May," Barlow reminded him. "And if you don't mill before that, you'll not be able to renew it. A late storm could ruin you, Carr."

"That's a chance we'll have to take."

"Well, I'm advising Mrs. Malone against it. It's better that she sell now at a profit than take the chance of losing out altogether."

Carr said softly, "Who's buying?"

"I'd rather not say. The point is—"

"The point is that you're working both sides of the fence," Carr broke in harshly. "The assay report showed great promise and Walsh knows it, and he wants to cash in. When he was sure I wouldn't sell, he tried to burn my wagons. Now he's working on you, Mrs. Malone, and there's a fortune in that mine. Dan knew it. He must have written you."

Barlow said angrily, "If you're insinuating—"

"Let Mrs. Malone have her say," Carr snapped.

She had been watching both men closely. Now she smiled at Barlow. "If you don't mind, I'd like to speak with Mr. Carr alone."

The lawyer rose reluctantly. "All right. But take my advice and don't be foolish." He shot Carr a dark look and went out.

Carr looked at Melody and said bluntly, "If the need for funds was your only reason for coming here, you might have written me."

She flushed. "I had other reasons. One of them is that I want to see the mine."

"That's impossible. It's a six-day trip up through rough country. Once there, we'll be snowed in. The pass fills to the brim in the winter."

"I know all that. I also understand that you need a cook, and I happen to be a good cook."

Carr stared at her and gave a short

laugh. "I'll have enough trouble without having you to worry about. I couldn't trust—"

Her eyes blazed. "Yourself?"

"I didn't say that," Carr began hotly.

"Never mind. Now you listen to me. I understand how you feel about the mine, and just maybe I feel the same way. And I mean to help if I can."

"You can help by going back to Denver."

She rose, her small hands clenched. "You're stubborn. Dan wrote that you were stubborn."

"You're no lily-of-the-valley yourself."

They faced each other. Melody Malone's head barely reached Carr's shoulder, but her small face was as set and stubborn as his.

She said crisply, "Very well. Then I'll have to sell out."

His jaw line hardened. She meant it. It didn't matter to her, all the work that had already gone into the mine. The gamble was too much, and he told her so.

Fury sparked her eyes. "That's not true! I told you I want to help, and I won't feel I'd be helping by working in a dress shop in Denver." She shook her head blindly. "I'm tired of being alone, if you want to know. I want to be part of something. Dan left me alone so much, and it isn't right!" She squeezed her eyes tight shut.

Carr cleared his throat and looked away. The fact of her loneliness was suddenly obvious to him. But what the hell! Who wasn't lonely?

She told him again, her voice flat and final, "Either you take me along or I sell out. It's up to you."

Carr groaned inwardly. Take her along or get used to Jay Walsh as a partner, and that was something he wouldn't even try. He said harshly, "You're asking for it."

"I can take care of myself."

"You'll be snowbound up there from now till April. You'll live in a shack and cook three squares a day for five or six men. Inside of a month you'll be wishing you were back in Denver."

"Maybe I will. But I'll stick it out."

He looked at her. He had to admit that he liked her spirit, but she didn't know, she didn't know. He went to the door.

"All right," he said. "Be ready at six in the morning. We might or might not roll. It all depends on whether or not I hire any men. And if you show up in that frilly dress I'll put you on the next stage out of here."

He went out, slamming the door behind him. . . .

Finding the two men waiting at the wagons was sheer luck, of course. Bulky men, bearded, looking no different from a thousand other miners. Gregg and Johnson by name, they were looking to work the winter through and build a stake.

Carr told them where they stood—no cash in their pockets until spring. They didn't like it, but after talking it over between themselves, they said all right.

So an hour before dawn, the wagons rolled away from town. Melody Malone, wearing jeans and a heavy mackinaw and a man's felt hat, hunched on the seat beside Carr, her small hands stuffed in her pockets against the cold. The sun rose miraculously, and shone on the snow-capped mountains. Carr drove the lead wagon and followed the dim trail through the rugged country.

"If it was anywhere near level," he told her, "we'd be there in two days. Once we get rolling up there, we'll have to see about improving the road."

She said softly, "Your heart is really in the mine, isn't it? I mean, it means more to you than just the gold."

"Well, the gold is the answer, but there is more to it than that."

All in all, it was a fine day, and they covered a lot of ground. And when they camped that evening beside the clear rush of a mountain stream, Carr learned that Melody hadn't lied about being a good cook. Lighting his pipe after supper, he sat with her beside the cooking fire, and there were questions and answers, mostly concerning the mine, Carr carefully avoiding any mention of Dan until he learned that she didn't mind talking about him.

"Why shouldn't I?" she said. "He was

a good man and I thought a lot of him. He used to write about this country, and how lovely it is. I guess that's one reason I came out."

They rolled early next morning, and when they made a short stop around noon, Oddie called Carr to one side.

"There's riders trailing us," he said. "Three of 'em. I glimpsed 'em when we come around that last shoulder."

"You sure they were trailing?"

"Pretty sure. But I'll make damn sure tonight."

After supper, Oddie wandered away in the twilight. Carr thought about it and worried some. Wagon train raiders had jumped more than one outfit in the wilds, especially close to winter, when a load of foodstuff was worth its weight in gold to the scattered mining camps. Carr rose and got his sixgun from the wagon, and buckled it on. He checked his rifle and walked over to Gregg and Johnson.

"You boys armed?"

THEY looked quickly at each other. Then Gregg, the one with the broken nose, said gruffly, "What if we are?"

"We just might run up against some trouble," Carr said, and told them where Oddie had gone. They didn't like it.

"We hired to drive your wagons and work in your mine," Gregg said. "We ain't being paid to do no gun fighting."

"There's nothing stopping you from walking back," Carr said flatly, and turned away, thinking at least he knew where they stood.

Oddie was gone three hours. When he got back he sank down on the log beside Carr.

"They're back there all right," he growled wearily. "Camped in a little draw. You reckon it means anything?"

Carr made a face. "Three men and four wagons. They couldn't handle all four. But there's no use taking chances. You and I will have to split the guard, Oddie. Count Gregg and Johnson out of it."

"That's all right," Oddie growled. "I don't think much of 'em anyhow."

Carr took the first watch, Oddie the second. When Carr woke up next morning, Melody was already frying bacon. Carr washed at the creek and came back to find her taking biscuits from the Dutch oven. The smell of coffee lingered in the crisp morning.

They ate. Gregg and Johnson finished first and took their cups and tin plates to rinse them in the stream. Carr was talking to Melody when they came back, and he saw her eyes widen, saw the change that came over her face. He turned his head quickly.

Standing a little apart were Gregg and Johnson, each man holding a gun on the three around the breakfast fire.

Gregg motioned with his gun. "Get up and unbuckle your gun-belt, Carr."

Carr, his face grim, did as he was told. Gregg edged over, picked up the belt and hung it over his shoulder.

He backed up, saying, "Sit down now, and no monkey business. Johnson, gather the rest of their guns." He motioned at Oddie. "You armed?"

"Come and find out," Oddie growled.

Gregg grinned and stepped up to Oddie. He brought the barrel of his gun down on Oddie's head, dazing him. His free hand searched Oddie swiftly and found the gun inside his belt. Johnson came back with two rifles under his arm.

"Watch 'em," Gregg said.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and gave a piercing whistle. Less than a minute later, there was the sound of shod hoofs on stone, and the three riders appeared. Carr had never seen any of them before.

Gregg said, "All right, boys. We got to move fast. Dale, you and Red hitch up. Jack, you load this stuff on that wagon. Leave that side of bacon where it is." He grinned at Carr. "That should last the three of you till you walk back to town."

"You're taking a big bite, friend," Carr said grimly. "Who's back of this? Walsh?" He watched Gregg closely.

"Welsh," Gregg said, still grinning, "Who the hell is he?"

Carr didn't say anything. He was looking at the raging Oddie's face, and Oddie

shook his head as though he wasn't quite sure. It was hard to tell, Carr thought, and cursed himself for not being more careful when he hired men.

The raiders worked quickly. Within ten minutes they had hitched up and had tied their riding horses to the tail-gates of the wagons. Carr glanced at Melody. She was sitting with her arms clasped around her knees, her small face pale, a stubborn look of anger to the set of her chin.

"Take 'em away, Johnson," said Gregg. He had tied one of the riding horses nearby, and now he sat down with his rifle across his knees. "I'll catch up with you all later."

Whips cracked the air, and the wagons rolled. Carr, feeling helpless, watched them disappear across a rocky rise.

Gregg grinned at him. "Just take your ease," he said. "We'll be here a spell. Long enough to make damn sure you don't make the mistake of trying to follow us."

There was nothing to do but sit. Gregg kept a good twenty feet between them, and there wasn't a chance of getting to him. The sun rose. It climbed the sky slowly and began its downward journey. Gregg rose finally. He mounted his horse and looked down on them.

"Start walking," he said. "Walk fast enough and you'll likely reach town tomorrow morning. And there's no use trying to round up a posse when you get there, because we'll be long gone before that."

They started walking and Gregg watched them. After awhile, Carr looked back and saw Gregg galloping after the wagons. He stopped. "This is as far as I go. Oddie, you see that Melody gets back to town."

Oddie scratched his whiskers. "I ain't sure, but I think one of 'em was with the bunch that gave us trouble the other night."

Melody said anxiously, "What are you going to do, John?"

"Trail 'em," Carr said. "Find out where they're heading. I can make better time on foot than they can in the wagons. Oddie, you talk to some of the boys in town. Tell 'em what happened. If I find that Walsh is behind this, we'll get a committee and move in on him."

"The law—" Melody began indignantly.

"There ain't no law in this country," Carr told her. "If we get the goods on 'em, they'll be tried by a miner's court." He took his knife from his belt. "I'll take a piece of that bacon."

Melody gripped his arm, concern on her small face. "Don't go, John! The mine isn't worth it."

"Yes, it is, and you know it. Dan got killed up there. How'd he feel if we let 'em go now?"

She lowered her eyes. In a small voice she said, "I guess you're right." She looked at him, her gaze searching, her eyes suddenly moist. "Don't take any chances, John. Be careful. You—could be killed, too."

"They'll have to try awfully hard," he said.

He left them, feeling fresh after his long rest, and he settled into a steady trot. The wagons had followed the dim trail toward the Melody, but he'd gone less than a mile when the wheel tracks turned west between the folds of two steep hills. He walked for a spell, then continued to trot.

At twilight, a blessed moon showed him the tracks quite clearly. He stopped once and chewed three strips of bacon and drank from a stream, then went on. A man seemed to have more staying power at night, though he was moving now at a slower pace.

At dawn, he came across the place where the wagons had stopped for the night. He sifted the coals of the fire with his hands and found them warm. The raiders had left here less than an hour ago.

Utterly tired, he slept till noon, then continued on the trail that angled now toward the south. He stopped and considered. With a small stick he drew a crude map of the area, estimating his position in relation first to the Melody mine, then to Walsh's Jayhawk Mine.

He nodded grimly. There was no doubt about it—the wagons were swinging

toward the Jayhawk which, in terms of distance, was less than fifteen miles from town. Carr rose and trotted along the trail.

It was dusk, and he knew he was close. He had prospected this part of the country and he recognized the shape of a hill, the slant of a canyon. The Jayhawk was at the base of that mountain less than two miles away.

THE moon was up when he worked his way through a growth of pines to the edge of a low bluff. He saw the road below, and then across it, and, about a hundred yards up, he saw lamplight shining through the window of a cabin. He slid down the bluff and walked forward slowly.

The face of the mountain loomed darkly behind the cabin. He made out a small corral, the shape of horses, then saw the wagons—his wagons—parked nearby. And he saw the saddled horse tied in front of the cabin. That likely meant someone had ridden here from town. Walsh? It didn't matter. Carr needed that horse.

Drawing nearer, he heard a shout from the cabin, followed by hoarse laughter. They must have tapped that whisky keg, Carr thought. The next moment something dark streaked around the side of the cabin, and the howling of a dog tore the quiet. Carr turned and ran.

He was face-down on top of the bluff, and the dog was still barking when the cabin door opened and a streak of yellow light spilled into the night. Then a flat, high figure stood there. The man came outside, followed by another, who weaved slightly.

"Blacky!" this man called loosely. "What the hell you barking about? Come here, damn you!"

The dog growled and trotted toward the cabin. The big man said something, and the other answered. Carr recognized Gregg's voice, and it sounded as though Gregg'd had his share of the whisky.

"Hell, it ain't nothing. Likely a coon. What the hell, Tasker, you don't think they followed us here, do you?"

Tasker spoke again, saying something Carr could not hear, and Gregg said, "Yeah, yeah, we'll get rid of the wagons... You going now? Well, you tell Walsh everything's taken care of. Don't worry about a thing."

Tasker put a boot in the stirrup and swung up. He spoke again, then turned his horse. Gregg stood there a moment, spat, then entered the cabin. The door swung shut.

Tasker came on at a trot and Carr rose to his hands and knees, knowing it was now or never. It would be impossible to snake a horse out of the corral with that dog around. As Tasker passed beneath him, he threw himself forward and felt the shock of it all through him as his body smashed into Tasker's and tore the man out of saddle.

Tasker grunted hoarsely when they hit the ground, and Carr struck down at the face with his big fist. Then he rose quickly, dragging Tasker's gun from its holster, and ran forward to grab the frightened horse's reins. He swung up at once and headed for town at a full gallop.

It was close to midnight before he got there, and he went at once to the hotel. A miner he knew motioned to him when he entered the lobby.

"They're upstairs, Carr."

They were in Melody's room, a half-dozen men, but Carr's gaze struck Melody first, and she smiled at him, relief breaking through the strained and weary lines of her small face. Her hand gripping his arm, she told him they'd reached town less than two hours ago, and that Oddie had spent that time gathering miners and merchants and telling them what had happened.

Carr faced the men and quickly told his story. They nodded grimly. Jay Walsh was not liked, not to be trusted, but no one had ever been able to prove anything against him.

"It's time we stopped him," said Fenton, who owned the stamp mill. "I'll round up some of my men and send them out to the Jayhawk before those sidewinders can get rid of your wagons. The rest of you

can put it up to Walsh and his crowd in the saloon. Either they leave town pronto or they stretch rope. He's likely been back of a lot of these raids we've been having, and it's time we had some law and order."

CARR said, "I'll face Walsh. The rest of you scatter through his saloon, in case there's trouble."

They tramped down the stairs, seven men. Three followed Carr into the saloon, while the other three went along the alley to come in the back way. Walsh's place was crowded, as usual, and Walsh himself was talking to one of his bartenders when Carr entered.

He walked straight up to Walsh, and the saloonman turned and looked at him sharply. Something in Carr's face must have told him, and he became still.

"I told you once I'd hold you to blame if anyone tried to stop me," Carr said, "and I told you I wasn't funning. You reached the end of your rope when you stole my wagons, Walsh."

There was a sudden quiet in the big room. Walsh said, "Make sense, Carr."

"Those jaspers I hired, Gregg and Johnson, they're on your pay-roll. They and three others took our wagons, and I followed 'em to your mine. You're finished, Walsh. Right about now Fenton's men are riding for the Jayhawk. And you're closing this place and moving out. Either that, or stretch rope, and that's a promise."

Jay Walsh looked around. He had cheated and stolen to get what he had, and he didn't mean to give it up without a fight. Now he glanced significantly at his bartenders, his bouncers, his housemen. From the looks of it, Carr was alone, and he could handle Carr. He smiled.

"Hell, man, what kind of fool talk is this?" He jerked his head and made a half-turn. "Let's go to my office and talk this over. I've been thinking and I—"

Carr reached out and gripped the lapels of Walsh's coat and drew him close. "Talk, hell!" he growled.

Walsh was looking past his shoulder. Carr turned his head and saw a houseman coming. Carr released Walsh and stepped aside, ready for whatever might happen.

"Try it," he said harshly. "Your men are covered, Walsh. Just try it."

Walsh shrugged. "Never mind—" he began, and his right hand flashed beneath his coat.

Carr was faster. He jerked the gun from his belt and fired. Walsh clasped his shoulder and sagged, pale-faced, against the bar.

"All right, boys," Carr said, and the other miners came forward, guns drawn, and herded Walsh's men to one side. Carr grinned. "Drinks on the house!" he called.

A man whooped, leaped over the bar, and began tossing bottles to the crowd. Girls shrieked, and ran for the stairs. A fight started over a bottle, and rather than give it up the man who held it flung it end over end at the bar mirror.

Someone fired a shot at a lamp. Men howled, and the floor shook. Carr edged outside and headed for the hotel, grinning wickedly. He hurried his stride when he saw Melody on the hotel veranda. . . .

Fenton's men rode into town the next morning with their prisoners and reported that Carr's wagons were still there and hadn't been touched. Carr told Melody about it.

"That means we can head up there and keep going straight for the mine. We'll get an early start in the morning."

"We could save a day by starting right now," Melody said.

Carr pursed his lips. Then he grinned. "I'm not taking a widow up there."

Her eyes narrowed and her chin came out. "Now you listen to me! Don't you start that again."

Carr shook his head stubbornly. "We'll be up there close to six months, and I couldn't trust myself that long. Either you go along as my wife or stay here."

She took a long breath. "It's—not fair. But you give me no choice."

"Not a one," Carr said.

"Well, then," she sighed, "I guess it has to be." Her eyes shone suddenly with a happy light. She gave him a push toward the door. "Now you get out of here and hunt a preacher. I have to change to my frilly dress."

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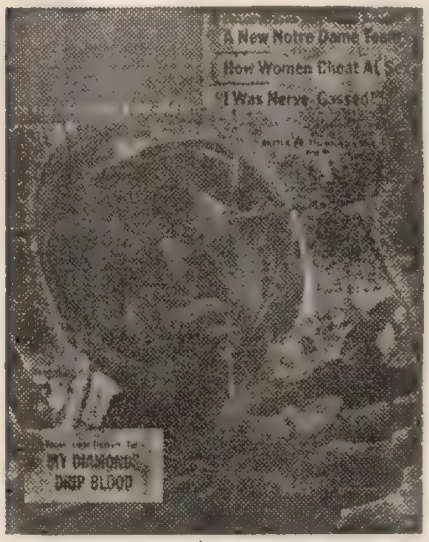

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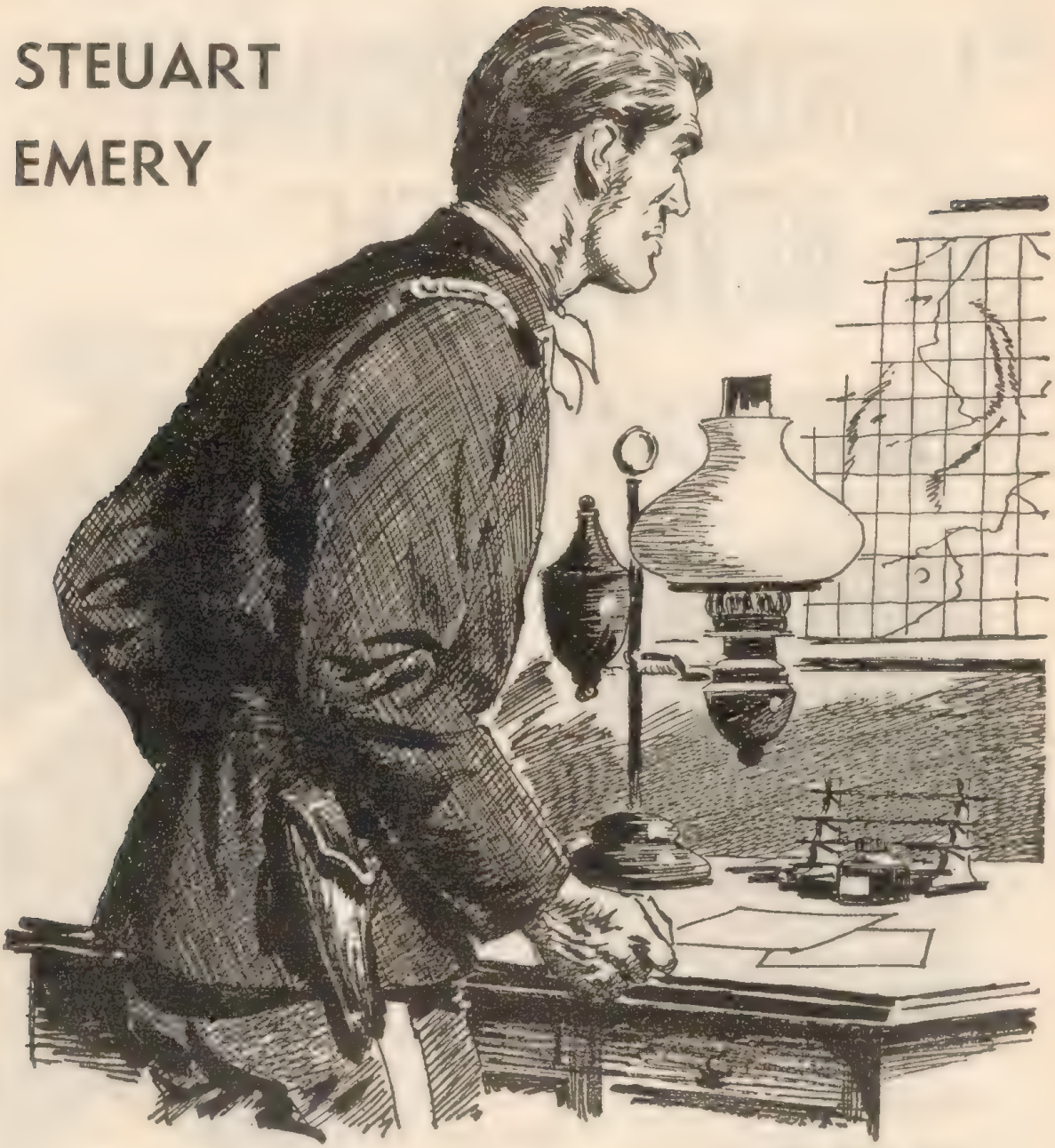

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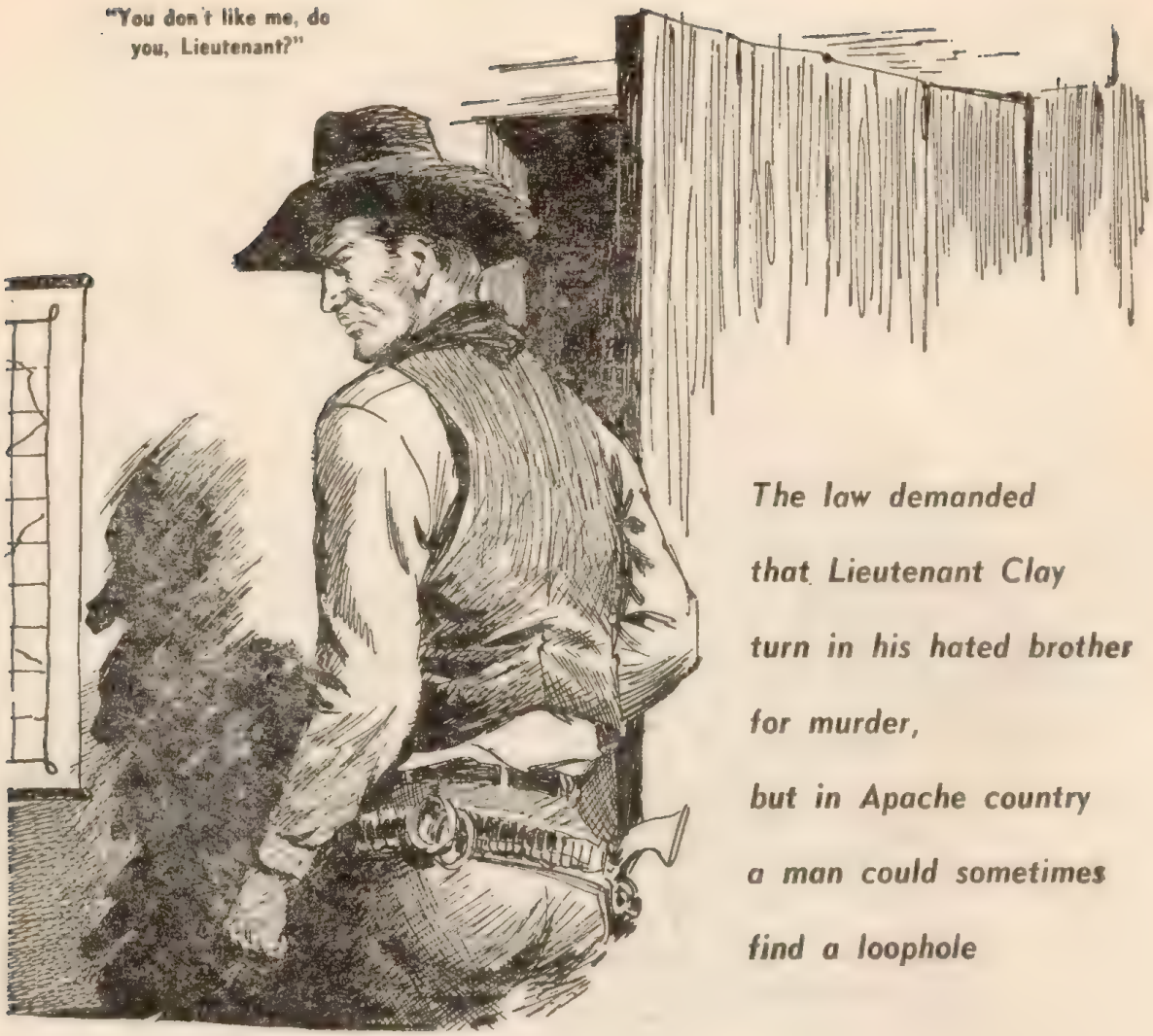


"You don't like me, do you, Lieutenant?"

The law demanded that Lieutenant Clay turn in his hated brother for murder, but in Apache country a man could sometimes find a loophole

CHAPTER I

Wanted for Murder

IT WAS only a sheriff's routine "Wanted" dodger, badly printed in smudgy ink on coarse paper, but it sent the chill of shock through him.

He raised his head, staring with unseeing eyes through the open window of Headquarters, out across the sun-seared parade ground where the dust devils danced in blistering desert heat to the far log wall of the stockade. In the stables horses stamped. The harsh voices of noncoms cracking orders at overalled fatigue details traveled into the room.

Out of the dull daily grind of a Border post crisis had blazed. He didn't have to look again at what was printed on the dodger. He had seen others like it before. They had been sent to Army posts along the Border as a matter of routine. He could recite every

word of this one:

WANTED FOR MURDER

Milo Kerke, age forty. Shot and killed Major Burgess. Tried, convicted, sentenced to death. Broke jail one week before date of execution. Six-feet-two, lean, muscular build. Red-gray hair. One eye light gray, other eye darker gray. Southern accent. Place under arrest immediately and wire,

Sheriff Martin Robey,
Johnsville, Madrid County, Texas.

He couldn't believe it, but there it was in cold print. And, after all, four years of war could harden a man so that killing came easy.

Lieutenant Greer K. Clay, commander of B Company, and acting as post adjutant the day following his return from a long leave, with the regular adjutant bedded down in hospital, had been through that war himself—and through plenty of Apache battle since. The look of frontier toughness and wariness was in his bronzed face, and his short, stocky frame was trained down to muscle.

Lieutenant Greer Kerke Clay, late of the Union Army, didn't look in the least like Milo Kerke Clay, former colonel, CSA, and twelve years in age separated them. But they were brothers, just the same.

He didn't even realize that he was in Fort Otis now, for his mind had automatically drifted back to the broad acres of the old Kentucky plantation where Milo, whom he worshiped, had raised him, taught him to shoot and hunt and ride. Milo, the true wealthy plantation owner's son, handsome, reckless, a rare hand with horses, guns or cards, and the picture of ballroom elegance, devoid of fear, admired by men and adored by Southern belles.

MILO had managed to get him sent to West Point, to follow in the footsteps of his father who had married into the Kerke family of Albany, just up the Hudson, and had mixed the hot Southern Clay blood with the cool Knickerbocker Dutch stock. Red-haired Milo was a Kentucky Clay, but Greer had inherited the Kerke characteristics, blond coloration and even their Northern accent.

Greer also had inherited the Northern sympathies of his mother's family. He could never forget a word of the terrible letter from Milo that spring day in '61 after he had written Milo that he was casting his saber in with the Union.

From this day you are no brother of mine. Never let me see you or hear from you again.

And he had never seen his older brother, Milo, since then, nor heard directly from him, although he had heard plenty about Colonel Milo Clay, the hellion of a Rebel cavalry leader in Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia, who was filled with a deadly fury against all Yankees. It was the old tragedy of the split family in the War between the States. But the fact that hundreds of other families were experiencing the same had never lessened the hurt.

"The "Wanted" dodger fluttered as a vagrant breeze move it on the desk. Greer Clay's closed fist smashed on it and pinned it down. His reverie went on. The old plantation burned, its acres barren at the end of the war. And Milo Clay, in some kind of Reconstruction trouble, had disappeared into the West. That was the word he had received when he had written to the postmaster in the sleepy little town near his old home.

He hardly remembered his father, and his mother had died when he had been ten and Milo twenty-two, startlingly mature for his age. Milo was all the family Greer had really ever known, and to him he owed everything he had and was. A laughing, generous older brother who could be as stiff a taskmaster as any West Point drill officer when occasion required. But Milo had filled a void in Greer's life that no one else ever could fill.

He had done his best to forget Milo, but now Milo was again into the forefront of his mind. Where was Milo, a convicted killer running to save his neck? Hiding out in some mining camp, working under an alias on some lonely ranch, living the life of a hunted man on the dodge?

The dodger warned all Army posts to seize him if he appeared, and Fort Otis was an Army post. Lieutenant Greer

Clay could clear that possibility out of the way instantly.

"Sergeant Major Crouch!"

A heavy-set, mahogany-faced noncom came in from the outer office and stood at attention.

"Have we taken in any recruits since I left on my leave?" the lieutenant asked.

"Plenty in the last month, sir, after the scouts brought in word that Long Knife is massing below the Border. The colonel's trying to fatten up to strength, in case Long Knife starts a war, which it looks like."

"I know all about Long Knife."

Endless hours of hardship in fruitless chase, in blazing minutes of combat was in Greer Clay's memory. Long Knife, the red ghost of the Border, had eluded the Army for years, raiding and burning and slaying. Right now Lieutenant Clay's own troop was out on the rim of the Border to guard against him.

"Any new recruits for the fort would pass through this office," he said. "Is there a man among them with mismatched eyes, one darker than the other?"

"Positively so, sir, and a good one. Old Rebel officer, I'd say. John Carson, listed as knowing telegraphy, and assigned to the signals shack on Headquarters detail."

The lieutenant's whole body stiffened.

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Nothing, Sergeant Major Crouch." Clay's throat had gone bone-dry, he had the sensation that someone other than himself was speaking. "Send the orderly over to signals and tell Trooper Carson to report to me."

"Yes, sir."

CROUCH went out and Clay leaned back in his chair. He wasn't even going to try to think. Fort Otis was on the direct line along the Border west to California where hundreds of fugitive men lost themselves in new identities. He rose behind the desk and braced himself as he heard long strides thumping on the floor boards of the outer office.

Then through the door came a tall figure, and even the passage of years which had wrought bitter changes couldn't conceal this trooper's identity. Although the once flaming red hair was densely sown with gray now.

"Close the door, please," said Clay.

The door was closed. The trooper stiffened to attention, his back a ramrod. His salute was perfect.

"Private John Carson reporting to Lieutenant Clay." The voice was pure well-bred Kentucky.

Milo Kerke Clay, in the uniform of blue that he hated, stood in front of his brother. In the clear sunlight the betraying difference in the shading of his gray eyes was pronounced. There was a blank look in them. The hard-weathered, strong face with the old reckless rake to the jaw was channeled with lines. Milo was forty years old now, and looked fifty. War and hardship had hammered him into cold steel. He stood staring at Greer, his face masklike.

Greer's hand shot out. "Milo!"

Milo looked past the outstretched hand as though it didn't exist.

"Private Carson reporting to Lieutenant Clay," he repeated in a tone that had a deadly chill in it.

The lieutenant let his hand drop laxly. A dull grief deadened him. So the old hatred lived on, burning as violently as ever, and would go on burning as long as Milo lived. He was implacable. He had taken refuge behind the anonymity of the United States Army uniform and he would keep that anonymity. There was nothing that Lieutenant Clay could do to break him down.

Milo stood in absolute silence. The only sound in the room was that of the flies droning up under the ceiling. He would keep that barrier of silence between common trooper and officer, answering only when the officer spoke to him.

"Okay, Trooper Carson. You enlisted while I was on my furlough. Right now I'm doing the back paper work that's piled up during Adjutant Ward's illness, and I've come across this." He held up the

dodger. "I figure it must have been shoved in the adjutant's drawer and lay there a couple of weeks, at least, before I turned it up. Read it."

He passed the dodger with its glaring, "Wanted for Murder" caption to Milo in whose eyes, as he scanned it, was no emotion whatsoever.

The lieutenant said, "You know, of course, what these things are. Plenty of wanted men hide in the Army in frontier posts until their chase is abandoned. It's a good trick to disappear on a patrol into hostile territory and be reported missing, probably dead, in case the authorities get wind of where they are. The Army usually doesn't pay much attention to this stuff It isn't a spy outfit for civilian authorities. But this one here is definitely Army business. Milo Kerke is wanted for killing an Army officer, and the Army is one big family. This is right in the family."

"Yes," said Milo harshly, and passed the dodger back. "It's right in the family."

"An officer who held his duty above everything else would have to arrest his own brother on that, Trooper Carson."

Milo Clay gave Greer stare for stare. "Yes, he would. I had a brother once."

Greer's pulses pounded. "Yes. Where is he?"

"He's dead. He died the day the War between the States broke out."

This was it, the old blow right in the face again. Greer Clay had died as far as Milo was concerned the instant he had pledged allegiance to the Union. He was still dead to Milo, whom it was his duty to see hanged.

AN OFFICER or trooper without a sense of duty was nothing. It was only a sense of duty that kept a man going through the hell of battle and incredible hardship and the tortures of thirst and man-killing desert heat. Somehow his had kept Greer Clay going through the clash of Rebel sabers and the storms of Rebel bullets and hideous Apache warfare.

"I see," he said and his breath came hard. "Now as regards this paper, the wanted man was Southern, it says, and he killed an officer who probably was from the North. It may have been a flare-up from the war, the officer may have called the Southerner a damned Reb, the Southerner may have cursed him back as a dam-Yankee, words led to blows and both were armed. Or there may have been other extenuating circumstances."

"That paper says the judge didn't think so. Nor the jury." Milo spoke with an impersonal coolness.

Milo Clay, his brother Greer knew, had killed men in war, men in blue he hated. But Milo wouldn't murder. Or would he? The thought came again that war and hatred could wreak terrible changes in a man's character. It was his job now to put Milo under arrest, have the Officer of the Day clap him in the guardhouse and telegraph to Sheriff Robey of Johnsville, Texas.

His brain seemed to be bursting with pressure. It was all too much to be handled offhand.

He never remembered the impulse that directed his movements then. There was the sound of rending paper and he held out the torn fragments of the dodger to Milo.

"Burn these. I don't believe anyone except the two of us know it ever reached the fort. The adjutant was down sick, Colonel Mott never looks at anything but Department Headquarters papers. He loathes paper work. This whole thing he'd shove in the adjutant's drawer unread. As far as this dodger is concerned it might just as well never have existed."

Milo was looking, not at Greer, but past him over his shoulder at the open window.

"Where there's a dodger there's mighty often a lawman following it. Out yonder, Lieutenant, there's a man who rides like a Texan coming in the gate."

Greer whipped around. Far down the parade ground a rider in a tall sombrero had stopped at the gate sentry's challenge. Even at that distance the sun struck a glint off the badge on his vest.

The rider tapped the badge with a finger, reached into his vest to draw out a folded paper, and held it down to the sentry, who jerked a thumb toward Headquarters. Man and horse came on at a slow lope.

The law had caught up to Milo Kerke Clay!

"Sergeant Major Crouch will keep him waiting outside until I am through with you, Trooper Carson," said Lieutenant Clay.

His brain raced as his eyes swept the pine-walled room. There was no entrance or exit to it except by the door leading into the outer office. When he dismissed Milo, his brother would have to walk out and into the arms of Texas law.

At a slight noise of movement, he turned to Milo. Up to now Milo's pose had been that of an automaton, a drilled soldier stiffly facing his officer, wooden and rigid. Now life flowed through him, his blank eyes were bright and wary. His legs, braced apart, had swift poise in them; his arms looked like sheer, flashing muscle.

One hand went up above his waist-band to where Greer could see the bulge of the small hand gun concealed under the shirt. The rhythmic grace of a born fighting man, readied for action and deadly in it, was in Milo Kerke Clay!

CHAPTER II

Loyalty—To Whom?

FROM the outer office Lieutenant Greer Clay caught the sound of a heavy tread and the harsh growl of a stranger's voice. He made out only the last words:

"—Madrid County, Texas."

"The lieutenant's busy right now," he heard Sergeant Major Crouch announce. "You'll have to wait. Sit down."

A body bumped onto a wall bench on the other side of the partition, hardly ten feet away. A hawking sound came.

"Lissen, you!" Crouch's voice rose in controlled rage. "You ain't at home in your Texas office. Spit on Headquarters floor again and, by Christopher, sheriff's badge or no badge, sheriff's gun or no gun, I'll rub your nose in it!"

An indistinguishable growling answered. It wouldn't do the visitor any good from now on, though, to grow impatient or to ask any questions of Sergeant Major Crouch. But the Sheriff of Madrid County would sit there, the cat in front of the mouse-hole. The instant he saw his fugitive, recognition would come. He would go for the gun at his belt, and Milo would go for his—and Milo would be quicker. There would be a gun battle and a dead sheriff on the floor of Headquarters.

And after that?

Lieutenant Clay walked to the desk and picked up his empty pipe, jamming it into his mouth and clenching his teeth on it.

"Listen to me, Trooper Carson," he said in a low voice. "You know the situation out at Diamondback Pass on the Border where we keep a troop on permanent watch in Fort Diamondback?"

Milo nodded.

"Then you know that a telegraph line connects it with the fort, and we are in steady communication with it. As adjutant of this fort I am authorized to issue orders in Colonel Mott's name. I am now ordering you, as an expert telegraph man, to inspect that line, poles, wire, insulation globes and so forth all the way to the Mexican border, thirty miles."

He wrote rapidly on a sheet of paper and held it out.

"This order detaches you from Fort Otis for duty with the outpost at Fort Diamondback. Pick up your repair kit, draw water and whatever rations you need, get your horse from the stable and start immediately."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Milo took the paper. His brother stepped to the window, staring out at the deserted parade ground.

"That's all, Trooper Carson."

Milo stiffened, saluted, and headed for the door. His hand had crept in under his shirt and Greer knew that it gripped the butt of his gun. He was going out of the door to the main office, walking into the waiting sheriff and the waiting gunfire.

"Carson!"

Milo stopped, and Lieutenant Clay beckoned to him. "I've dropped my pipe out the window. Climb out, please, and hand it to me."

"Yes, sir."

Milo flung a leg over the window sill and dropped to the ground. He handed up the pipe that lay on the sand, stony-faced. Against the wall at the corner stood a rain barrel with several of its staves brightly new. Three or four of the old, replaced staves leaned against the wall.

"Now you're outside, Trooper Carson," the lieutenant ordered, "you might take those staves the farrier sergeant left behind back to him at the stables, and draw your horse for your trip."

"Yes, sir."

Milo hoisted the staves and walked off, just one more trooper on fatigue with a load on his shoulder to anyone who might be looking out of a Headquarters window. And Sergeant Major Crouch hadn't told the sheriff that anyone was with Lieutenant Clay.

The lieutenant gave Milo a good start, then raised his voice.

"Sergeant Major Crouch!" The sergeant major promptly opened the door. "Did I hear a visitor come into the office? Send him along."

THE noncom jerked his thumb, spurs clashed, and a big, swarthy man swaggered through the door. The holster flap of his low-slung gun was tied back and handcuffs swung at his belt. His opaque eyes were set too closely beside a long nose with a spreading tip and flaring nostrils. His face reminded the lieutenant of the face of a bad horse. This sheriff was just another professional gunman and killer with a badge.

"I'm Sheriff Robey of Johnsville, Madrid County, Texas," said the big man in a grating voice that had a nasal twang to it. Clay had heard that accent along the Border. It was plain New England Yankee carpet-bagger.

"Yes," he said stiffly. "What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"I've come to get an escaped murderer who's hiding out in this fort. You got my dodger on him I sent to all the posts?"

"I don't remember this post getting any, Sheriff."

Robey cleared his throat roughly. "That makes no matter as it happens, Lieutenant. I've traced him here. Put a watch on his woman's mail back at Johnsville and, sure enough, he wrote her after his getaway. Said he'd enlisted at Fort Otis, but didn't give no name, signed with a cross in a circle. His real name's Milo Kerke. So trot me out your new enlistments, Lieutenant, and I'll do the rest."

Robey's eyes slitted and there was mercilessness in them. All along the lieutenant had been receiving the impression that there was something personal, some special hatred goading Robey to search for Milo. Now he was sure of it.

"I can't do that without the colonel's permission," he said, "and he isn't available right now. He's spending the afternoon with the adjutant who's ill in hospital."

"Then get me the paper records of the new recruits. They'll have the physical descriptions on 'em. This Milo Kerke has got something he can't hide or change. Gray eyes, one of 'em darker than the other. You seen a new trooper like that? You wouldn't forget him."

"I haven't seen any new troopers. I just got back from furlough." The lieutenant added acidly, "Out here we don't necessarily go too deeply into the color of a recruit's eyes. We just count them."

"Don't josh with me, Lieutenant," Robey said gratingly. "Not if you want to keep them bars on your shoulders. I got an extradition warrant for Milo Kerke from the Governor of this Territory in my inside pocket." He tapped his vest. "When I see your colonel he'll damn well parade his recruits, and I'll slap my hand

pronto on Milo Kerke. His execution date was set for the week beginning yesterday. Maybe I'll get the colonel to let me hang him right in this fort."

"You will like hell!" Blind fury that was mounting in Greer Clay burst its bounds.

Robey bared his yellow teeth in a snarl. "Lissen, Lieutenant, Milo Kerke killed a United States major who was sent into Johnsville on the quiet to investigate the holdups of the United States mails. Kerke was a red-hot Secesh, hating the guts of any man in a blue uniform, a real malo hombre, and under suspicion a long time for the stage holdups. The major must have got the evidence on him, and Kerke figured he had to kill him to shut his mouth. Kerke was caught with his gun smoking, standing over the body of the major in an alley. He'd shot him in the back. Never give him a chance."

"You—you—" Just in time Lieutenant Clay bit off his words. But Robey's wary eyes had caught the change in his face.

"What heats you up, Lieutenant? You ain't no Secesh like Kerke, who was plumb mean and unreconstructed from the top of his head to the tar on his heels. Something wrong?"

"Nothing," said Clay.

He simply could not, would not believe that Milo Kerke would shoot an enemy from behind without warning!

HIS glance strayed out of the window and caught the figure of the trooper on horseback, black leather repair kit slung over his shoulder, just cantering out of the gate. There went Milo, clear of the fort and his bloodhound of an enemy.

"I am not leaving this fort without him," growled Robey. "I'll stay here and count every sweaty nose in it if I have to until I get him and clap these on him." He lifted the handcuffs dangling at his belt and dropped them, clashing. "Then back he goes with me to Johnsville, and in a week he is kicking at the end of a rope like he deserves."

"I tell you again you'll have to wait for the colonel, Robey. In the meantime why not drop into the Officer's Mess next door and get yourself a pot of coffee?"

The lieutenant wanted desperately to be alone, to think, to figure out some kind of action. Robey was staring at him in a measured silence. And he was no fool. He was a dangerous man. Clay caught the smell of stale sweat and last night's whisky coming from him.

"The orderly will get you a drink if you want it, also," he suggested.

"Sounds all right," Robey grunted, and turned. He cleared his throat again and looked around for a place on the floor. He had his hand on the knob of the door and opened it.

"And don't spit on the floor when you get there!" flared Lieutenant Clay, the hatred swelling in him. "The Officers' Mess happens to be our home."

Robey swung around. His eyes became slits. Clay almost expected him to lay his ears back.

"You don't like me, do you, Lieutenant? Well, I don't like you back and plenty of it. And when Sheriff Mart Robey of Madrid County, Texas, don't like someone it ain't so good for that someone."

He went out, swaggering, and leaving the door open. Greer Clay waited until he heard his boots on the porch, then he called:

"Sergeant Major Crouch!"

Crouch came in, his weathered face expressionless. For five long years the lieutenant had known and worked with this gray-thatched noncom, and there was no pretense of rank between them when they were alone. Here was a tested friend and ally.

"What do you think of our friend who just left? About the same as I do, I gather."

"Him? When I was a private on stables I forked plenty big loads of him over my shoulder."

"Yes, he's a big load, and I think he's bad. But we'll forget him. You've got the service records of the Headquarters troops out there?"

"At my elbow, sir."

"Then bring me the record of that new recruit, John Carson, assigned to Signals on Headquarters detail."

"Yes, sir." Crouch was out and back with the thin sheaf immediately. Clay spread it on his desk.

There it was at the bottom of the brief description of name, birthplace, and so forth, all of which was false. But the words after, "Distinguishing Physical Characteristics" were not false. They would uncover and hang Milo Clay—"Mismatched eyes. Right eye, light gray; left eye, dark gray."

"Will you do something for me?" Greer Clay asked.

"Just call for your cards, sir. I'll deal 'em your way."

Lieutenant Clay undid his tunic and pushed the betraying record away in an inner pocket. Now when Colonel Mott gave his permission to Sheriff Robey to look over the recruits' records there wouldn't be any sheet on a man with mismatched gray eyes, no evidence that he ever had enlisted in Fort Otis.

"Don't mention to anybody that I have this record from the files. It'll turn up when the proper time comes and not before."

"In my day I've mislaid papers when it seemed fit and proper, Lieutenant," Crouch said casually. But he grinned meaningfully and turned his head, looking into the outer office where a corporal had just clumped onto the porch. He said quickly, "Signals Corporal Whitaker arriving at the double. Shall I call him in, sir?"

Clay nodded, and Crouch barked at the noncom. He came right on and handed Greer the field telegraph form.

"Telegraph report from Lieutenant Benson out at Fort Diamondback outpost, sir."

The message was short:

> Smoke signals going up constantly for last hour from buttes below Border. Now being answered from distance far south and west of Border.
>
> Lieutenant Benson

CHAPTER III

"I'm Staying, Lieutenant"

APACHE smoke going up at last after months of tension, with Long Knife known to be massing his forces! Few white men ever could read those signals, but every frontier officer knew what they meant. Movement of the sullen coppery killers up from Old Mexico and across the line.

War was coming to Fort Otis and it would hit its outpost, Diamondback, first!

"Corporal," said Lieutenant Clay, "take this message straight to Colonel Mott. You'll find him at Adjutant Ward's bedside in the hospital."

"I just saw him talking to Surgeon Brack on the hospital porch, sir," said Crouch. "Meaning he's leaving." He strode into the outer office and to the door. "Coming across the parade ground now for Headquarters."

"Good. Go on back to your wire, Corporal."

Clay frowned. The plan that had crept into his mind half-formed was crystalizing now into full and final shape. Luck had again broken for him in this yellow field message.

He stiffened into salute as Colonel Mott swung into the room. The commanding officer was a hawk-faced, silver-mustached veteran of the Civil War, as well as the starkest Indian fighter on the Border. He led men superbly and held the loyalty of every officer and man in his command.

"Long Knife, sir." The lieutenant extended the message, and Mott's keen eyes took it in with a single glance.

"Not so good, Clay. But we're ready for him and his tricks. Benson has a full troop out there at Fort Diamondback to block Long Knife, and a direct telegraph Link. We're in good position."

"Yes, sir. He has B Company—my own troop." Clay cleared his throat and took his gamble. "I know every man in it. And

I was just thinking. They've been out there at Fort Diamondback twelve days running. Water will be low, hard rations aren't the best for morale. And Benson, while he's a damned good second lieutenant, is new. He hasn't had experience with Long Knife and his red devils. He might miss a lot of Apache sign that I could recognize and read. So I suggest, sir, that I go out there tonight and take over the command. I should be able to push a scout or so through the pass and down below the Border to keep tabs on Long Knife. An immediate inspection of Fort Diamondback and the readiness of its detail to repel an attack wouldn't do any harm in my opinion."

"Or in mine, Clay. It might be necessary to replace B Company with a fresh troop, or send reinforcements. And I want to know at the first possible moment what Long Knife is up to."

"I figure I can get you a report right after dawn, Colonel Mott." Hope was swelling high in Greer Clay. "It ought to take some time for Long Knife's reserves to reach him, if that's what his smoke is calling for, and I can clear up a complete inspection tonight. Since Apaches almost never attack at night."

"Right." Mott's face darkened with thought. "Yes, you should have time for a thorough inspection and report by telegraph. Diamondback Pass is the danger spot—the only real break in the mountain wall within fifty miles in either direction. You can take over at Diamondback, Clay. Leave whenever you like and give me a full report as soon as possible. I'm alerting this post immediately."

He turned to the noncom. "Sergeant Major Crouch, tell the Headquarters bugler to sound Officers' Call. As the officers get here send them to me in the Officers' Mess. We'll have more room there, and I'm going to hold a discussion after I've laid out the campaign plans against that damned Long Knife."

"Yes, sir."

As Crouch headed for the open door he almost collided with the bulky figure that was coming through it. The reek of whisky was on Robey, and he glowered. Colonel Mott stared at him distastefully.

"Sheriff Robey, Madrid County, Texas, Colonel," announced Robey. He jerked a dirty thumb at Clay. "This lieutenant tell you what I'm here for?"

"Not yet."

"Then I'll tell you. You got a fugitive I want, hiding out in your regiment in this fort. I've come for him. You seen a Southerner with mismatched gray eyes in your recruits?"

MOTT spoke stiffly. "You don't expect a colonel to know his new recruits, do you? And I don't care much for visiting sheriffs who are chasing men who left wives they didn't get along with, or on making a fresh start after failing somewhere else."

"This fugitive ain't no wife-dodger. He murdered a United States Army major, that's what. Gunned him from behind in an alley, and ducked the noose by breaking jail after conviction."

"That's bad," rasped Colonel Mott. His mouth hardened. "That puts quite a new face on the matter. You'll have my full cooperation in your search, Sheriff. I'll parade every new enlistment this fort's got in front of you, for you to pick your man. Mismatched gray eyes, etc? You can even pick him off the new service records."

The last notes of Officers' Call blasted across the parade ground. Mott started for the door.

"There's a war I've got to look after first, Sheriff," he said. "Come along with me to the Officers' Mess. Don't worry. This fort is now on a war footing. Not a man can leave it except for active duty. The killer is boxed in."

He strode for the door, with Robey lumbering behind him. Robey darted a look of malign challenge over his shoulder at Lieutenant Clay. He opened his fist and shut it as though grasping an object. He thought he had Milo Kerke in the palm of his hand.

They were gone then, and Clay stepped over and closed the door. He touched his

pocket, felt the crackle of paper inside his tunic. Moving to the desk, he opened the top drawer and drew out the colonel's checkbook. The colonel used the same railhead bank in which Clay himself and the other fort officers kept accounts.

Detaching a check he made it out and signed it, staring at it for moments.

Pay to the order of cash . . . $500

Crossing to the office safe there, he twirled the combination, swung the door open, and lifted out a heavy canvas bag. His hand dipped into it and counted out twenty-five double eagles which he distributed in various pockets so that they showed no bulge. He shoved his own check into the bag, and put it back, closing the safe and locking it.

At the desk he wrote briefly on a message form and sealed it in an envelope which he addressed. Sergeant Major Crouch looked up at him, wooden-faced, as he came out into the main office.

"I'm on my way to Diamondback, Sergeant Major Crouch," he said. "See that you deliver this envelope personally to Colonel Mott when you bring him in his noon coffee tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said Crouch. A gleam of curiosity showed in his eyes.

"You might as well know what's in it, Crouch, but keep it under your stetson. It's my resignation from the Army, to take effect as of my return from Diamondback."

Crouch's eyes bulged in his head.

"I'll see the colonel gets it, sir. And I'll see he gets his coffee extra black along with it."

* * * * *

Greer Clay eased himself in saddle and pulled his mount down to a walk for the end of his run. Behind him thirty miles of desert stretched to the fort he had left, and he had taken plenty of time on the ride, nursing his horse along at a gentle lope, walking him or stopping for rest constantly. He didn't want to end up at Fort Diamondback with a fagged mount. He wanted one in good condition to do another thirty miles before dawn if necessary.

Ahead of him a long broken ridge of malpais swelled up from the flatland, four hundred yards from the outpost. He could see the line of telegraph poles he was following run up and over its crest. He was skirting it in a few minutes and straightening out for the fort.

In a sky studded with stars that glowed with an incredible brilliance in the clear desert air the moon rode high, washing the waste with silver and inky shadows. It was a night of peace, but there were no thoughts of peace in his mind. He knew the menace that lurked under the quiet, and moreover he had a crisis of his own to meet.

"Who goes there?"

THE challenge traveled to him almost as soon as he had rounded the corner of the malpais and his solitary mounted figure became visible to the outpost. The voice was harsh and cracked.

"Lieutenant Clay from Fort Otis."

He raised his hand high and put his horse into a trot. Then he was working up a rise through the gap in the breast-high wall of the fort, and dismounting in the center of the rectangle.

In one glance he saw that the outpost was skillfully alerted. A line of sentries stretched along the southern wall, facing the mountain masses that reared high a quarter of a mile to the south, with the black cleft of the pass making a darker blotch. The rest of the troop were sleeping in the shadows, under arms.

A brawny noncom with three chevrons and a diamond on his sleeve came up at once.

"Glad to see you, Lieutenant Clay." His voice, also, was hoarse.

"What's the matter, First Sergeant Ryan?"

"Water's run out, sir. Leak in the last bag, dammit, and no one noticed. It irrigated Arizona and left us flat since sundown. Tomorrer will be real bad if Long Knife jumps us. Being in command right now, I've called in all the canteens and

am sitting on 'em."

"You're in command? Where's Lieutenant Benson?" Quick tension began to build in Clay.

"Second Lieutenant Benson took a point o' three troopers into the pass on a scout right after dark."

"And you—you—" Clay knew this veteran noncom through and through. He'd done plenty of campaigning with him. "You let him go? Good God, Ryan, sign can't be read properly or even spotted by night! Benson can go past a hundred Apaches lurking under cover in the dark and never see them!"

"I ain't an officer which could stop him, sir. He wouldn't let no one lead the scout but himself, would Lieutenant Benson. He is young and enthusiastic."

"And inexperienced," rasped Clay. "He doesn't know yet that an officer's job out here is to command, not to lead scouts. Okay, I'm here to inspect and take over, and I want to report my arrival to the fort. Is the wire in working order? I sent a repair man, Trooper Carson, out to look over its whole length. Did he arrive?"

Ryan jerked his thumb toward a flat boulder in the center of the outpost over which loomed the telegraph pole.

"Setting at the key yonder. A good thing, too. Telegrapher Purvis got hit by the desert fever at sundown, hit bad, and he's wrapped up and tucked away in a blanket, babbling about the cool creeks in Indiana. He don't know his own name, let alone being able to tap out a wire."

Out of the moonlit murk Clay's face sprang in a swift circle of light, hard and competent. He was sitting beside the flat rock on which the instrument rested, putting a match to the bowl of his pipe.

"I'll see Carson," Clay said shortly. "I can send myself, if anything goes wrong. You've got a good watch out, Ryan. We'll keep the fort that way from now on."

He looked at the pass where the shadows lay. Somehow they seemed evil shadows, deep, and screening danger. The mouth of the pass opened out into a high-banked ravine like a trough that ran to the base of the rise on which the outpost stood, blocking all exit to the desert. Fort Diamondback had been superbly placed to repel any mass break-out of Apaches.

"Yes, sir." Ryan's gaze was following Greer's along the trough and into the maw of the pass. "I feel it in my bones we are in for a big fight. Also in the prickling of my scalp. Young Lieutenant Benson must be clean through the pass and out the other side by now. I am worried about him."

"So am I." The lieutenant walked toward the rock that served Milo as an excellent telegraph desk. Milo, sitting on a ration box, looked up at him.

"Trooper Carson," Greer Clay said in a clear, carrying voice, "send this message of my arrival to the fort."

HE PICKED a field form off the pile on the rock and wrote on it.

"Yes, Lieutenant Clay," Milo said coolly, and his forefinger began to press the key, clicking away expertly. He stopped and a return clicking came. "Message received by fort, sir. Wire line in perfect order all the way on my inspection."

"Good." Lieutenant Clay's voice dropped to a pitch only his brother could hear. To the troopers anywhere nearby he would simply be giving some routine instructions to the telegraph man. "Milo, Sheriff Robey has got you cold back there at Fort Otis. Colonel Mott will do anything to help capture the killer of an Army major. So he's letting Robey go through the post with a fine-tooth comb. He won't turn you up there, but he'll clap the irons on you the minute this detail returns to Otis if you come back with it. You'll hang in a week."

"Yes?" said Milo, without emotion.

"What do you think I sent you out here on the edge of the Border for, the minute Robey showed up? So you could slip through Diamondback Pass and into Mexico for a getaway! Now Long Knife is down yonder. But you can still get out clear, east or west, and down below the Border through any of the small passes fifty miles or so from here. I kept my

horse rested on the ride here, Milo. He's twice as good a mount as any ordinary troop horse in this fort and there's five hundred dollars in gold in my saddlebags. That's more than enough to get you to Mexico City, where there's plenty of work for soldiers of fortune."

"You plan well, Lieutenant Clay," said Milo, in the same toneless voice.

"So as soon as the moon goes down I'm detailing you to a one-man scout, east or west as you prefer. Get going, and good luck to you."

"I'm not going. I'm staying here, Lieutenant Clay."

"What? Milo, are you crazy?"

"Trooper John Carson, Lieutenant Clay. There's a fight coming to this fort. I've fought Indians, and I can smell trouble as well as Sergeant Ryan can. I never ran from a fight yet. Did they teach you to run from a fight in West Point, Lieutenant Clay?"

"You mad fool!"

"This fort will need a telegrapher badly in case of action. I'm it . . . Yes, I heard you tell Sergeant Ryan you can run a telegraph, but you can't do that and command in battle, too. In B Troop there happens to be eight Johnny Rebs, two of them former officers. They're my friends, and they're going to be in hell's own frying pan. Did they teach you to leave your friends in the lurch at West Point in the face of action, Lieutenant Clay?"

CHAPTER IV

Just One More Gun

UNBREAKABLE, Milo stared at the brother he refused to own. No, Milo Clay wouldn't save his own neck and leave his fellow troopers in danger when he could help them. He had found his own kind in the hated blue uniform of B Company, a hard core of ruined Southerners who knew only war. Stark combat men all, they were fighting it in a new country, the West.

"Milo, you—"

"Steady, Lieutenant Clay." Milo's gaze went past him, out over the northern desert, now transformed almost into the clarity of day by the brilliant moon. "The trouble I smelled is here," he said gently. "That's no squirrel out there going up the telegraph pole." His voice rose in an instinctive command. "North wall! Apache climbing for the wire on the malpais ridge! Gwathmey, Moulton—bring him down!"

"We heard you!" called back a voice with a heavy Southern accent, and carbines crashed.

In a roar of fire the guard on the north wall hurled lead at long range, leveled on the dark shape that was swiftly mounting the pole that crowned the summit of the ridge.

"Going up the handspikes, Lieutenant," said Milo. "And he's got the pole between him and us. He'll make it to the top easy. Then his hand ax will do the trick."

The distant figure swarming the pole through a sheet of bullets swung up by the cross-bar. An arm went back, striking, and striking again. For an instant as the Apache reached far out in a fierce blow at the wire, his body came into view. It jerked upright and collapsed, falling limply to the rock.

Milo reached out his hand and the telegraph key began to click. "Fort . . . fort . . . fort . . . " Greer read the message. "Answer at once . . . Is wire open?"

Milo stopped, and with nerves drawn tense Greer waited. No sound came from the instrument.

"Wire's down, Lieutenant Clay," Milo said coolly. "The Injun got the wire before the boys got him. And there's no repair job on that one. I reckon the desert is swarming with Apaches out yonder behind the malpais. They have traveled out of those small passes for fifty miles or so, to cut us off in our rear, and just missed you. Long Knife's out to the north."

"He's out to the south, too," said Lieutenant Clay grimly.

The ragged rattle of rifle fire at a distance was breaking out, coming closer by the second. The sound was carrying out of the mouth of the pass that had swallowed up Lieutenant Benson and his three men.

"The red devil has trapped the point!" Clay shouted. "Sergeant Ryan!"

"Yo!"

Clay raced to the south wall and Ryan lumbered up to him. The intermittent shooting went on, undisciplined. The lieutenant recognized its nature. Apaches riding at full gallop were shooting blindly at their target—and no heavy crashes of carbines or Army Colts were answering! Out there in the murk of the pass troopers were running for their lives, with Long Knife's braves on their horses' tails.

"Here comes the point now, Lieutenant!" Ryan yelled. "No, dammit, it's just one man got away!"

Out of the pass and into the trough to the fort burst a lone rider, lying low over the outstretched neck of his horse. The insane screeching behind him mounted. Then a dark blur of riders swept out of the defile, shooting as they came.

"At those Apaches!" shouted Lieutenant Clay. "Covering fire!"

The top of the fort wall flashed with flame as troopers hurled lead over the head of their racing comrade. Twenty carbines were going hard and fast, and against their storm no group of Apaches could last. Howling braves pitched off their ponies and littered the bottom of the trough. Random bullets from the remainder whipped over the wall and the charge broke.

Long Knife's bucks yanked their ponies around and, yelling furiously, vanished into the murk of the pass.

THE LONE trooper kneed his mount through an aperture in the wall and slid heavily to the ground. He panted, unable to speak.

"You just about made it, Floyd," Sergeant Ryan said grimly.

"All right, Floyd," said Lieutenant Clay. "Get your breath back and report what happened. Lieutenant Benson?"

"They got him, sir. The other side of the pass where the ground's flat, but full of big boulders and mesquite for cover. We'd gone clear through the gut and wall beyond, with never a sign of them red devils. Then they jumped us from nowhere."

"Apaches always jump from nowhere."

"Six arrows went into the lieutenant, and he never knew what hit him. Three arrows got Snyder, and two braves jumped from the top of a big boulder onto Pierce and tomahawked him. By luck I'd fallen about forty yards behind to tighten a loose cinch and was back in saddle. I got two of the devils with two shots and ran for it with the pack on my heels."

"How many Apaches were there?"

"One hell of a lot, Lieutenant. They were all over the place when they hit. Twenty or thirty of 'em chased me, and there was a lot more coming up from the south."

"And there are a lot more coming from the north," Ryan said drily. "Look at the top of that ridge! Listen to the yelling!"

Clay stared northward. A score of figures dotted the crest of the malpais, and whooping rose from behind it from others, out of sight. There was no need for Long Knife's braves to hide their presence now that the fight had begun.

Sudden screams, holding a note of surprise, rose amidst the whooping. A rifle cracked, then a fusillade broke out. The Apaches on the ridge began to run toward the eastern end.

"Someone's coming from the fort, Lieutenant Clay," said Milo. He had come up quietly from his useless telegraph post. "He's trying to run for it past the end of the ridge."

"North wall, prepare to fire!" shouted the officer.

Then around the end of the ridge, driving hard, streaked another rider making for safety. Even at that distance Clay could see that he didn't ride like a trooper, and his high-crowned hat was not the head gear of a trooper. On his track rode a dozen mounted Apaches, picking up on him fast. Their fleet-footed desert

ponies were making a terrific burst of speed. They were going to catch him!

"Fire!"

Carbines exploded, and the range was short. Troopers plunged lead with merciless accuracy. Braves and ponies went down as the pursuit wilted, and the tall-hatted rider spurred his mount up the rise and into the fort.

"Fifty to sixty Apaches out there!" he yelled. "Lieutenant Clay! Where's Lieutenant Clay!"

"Milo," Greer Clay said huskily, "get out of sight!"

"No use, Lieutenant Clay. He's spotted us."

The big rider swung out of saddle and made for the lieutenant. He pulled up in front of him, his hand on the gun at his belt.

"Well, Sheriff Robey?" said Clay. Rage surged in him. "You've picked a fine time for a visit."

"I came after *him*." He nodded toward Milo. "I found out he was in this outpost." The gun flashed from holster, leveled at Milo's stomach. "Stand still, Milo Kerke, while I put the handcuffs on you."

"You'll put no handcuffs on any soldier in this fort!" Clay said grimly.

"I won't, won't I? I'm a sheriff in pursuit of his duty who's captured a fugitive murderer."

"And I'm the officer in command of a United States fort in action. You may have come through a screen of Apaches, but that's nothing to the force Long Knife has in the pass. We're boxed in, and you don't happen to know that the wire to Fort Otis is down—which means no reinforcements. This is a battlefield, and all you are on it is an extra rifle."

FRUSTRATED fury glittered in Robey's eyes. He pushed his gun an inch or so toward Milo. "Huh?"

"Drop that gun!" Clay ordered sternly. "Trooper Carson is a rifle, too. We're going to need every man we've got in this fort if we want to save our scalps. Any official business you have here I'll attend to later. That is, if I'm alive and you're alive to attend to it."

"You damned young jack-in-shoulder-bars, you can't give orders to me!" Robey yelled defiantly.

"I can give any order I please on a battlefield—to you or anybody else—and you'll obey it! If you hamper my actions here by disobedience I can order a trooper to shoot you as a military necessity."

"Order me to shoot him," drawled Milo in a tone of deadly menace.

Robey's gun muzzle wavered away from Milo, and slowly the gun went back in his holster.

"I'll take care of you later, Kerke," he growled. "Like the lieutenant promised."

"You won't be here later. You're going to be a battlefield casualty, Robey. That's my promise."

"Shoot the sheriff who's caught you in the back during action and run for it, you—"

"Shut up, both of you!" snarled Lieutenant Clay, his nerves raw. "You'll fight Long Knife, not each other. Sergeant Ryan!" The sergeant lumbered over. "I'll command here from the center with a heavy firing force concentrating on the trough up which I figure the main attack will come, mounted. I'll keep Trooper Carson here with me, and a squad of eight men as reserve that I'll pick myself." Mechanically his mind was working out the plan of defense. "As I read it, Long Knife plans to pin us down with fire sweeping the fort from the malpais while his pony braves ride us down and swamp us from the pass. Or he may throw a charge from both sides at once. You'll go up and down the whole perimeter of the defense, watching for the weak spots."

"Yes, sir." Ryan saluted and was off.

"Sheriff Robey," said Greer crisply, "go to the south wall and stay there."

Robey bared his teeth in a snarl, but lurched over to the position. Greer and Milo Clay stood alone.

"Milo," Greer said, "I'm going to turn the picking of the reserve squad over to you. Draw your eight Southern friends, and tell Ryan it's my selection."

"You'll find none better in this fort," said Milo.

He was back in two minutes with his squad. Every man had a look of weathered bitterness about him and would be a hard man in a fight. For they were knitted together in a tight bond no Northerner would ever know—that of a Lost Cause.

"I'm making you acting sergeant, Carson," said the lieutenant, "in command of the reserve. The first thing you do is plug that hole in the wall with a barricade." He pointed to the gap in the south wall, made for the passage of a wagon. "Barricade it with timber, boxes, anything that an Apache pony can't jump over."

"There's something better than timber or boxes, Lieutenant Clay. Also, it'll trundle easy. Roll up that wire drum, men. It may come in handy for something else than a barricade, Lieutenant. I used one once in a tight spot."

CHAPTER V

Carpet-Bagger Justice

LIEUTENANT GREER CLAY watched the squad maneuver the big drum into the opening, and block it in place with a balk of timber under the solid wooden wheels. Between them stretched the central spool on which the fort's reserve telegraph wire was coiled.

Robey, some five yards from the drum, turned his head as Milo walked over to him with his squad behind him.

"Nice hot spot you've got for yourself here, Sheriff Robey," Milo said in a deadly soft voice. "Meet my friends, the reserve squad. All Southerners that I've told about you. Being the reserves now, we shall be firing away from behind you with a fine view of your shoulder-blades."

Robey's face twitched, and he opened and closed one fist. He might be a ruthless gunfighter, but Lieutenant Clay sensed that he was the kind of man who never made a fight unless he had the first draw.

"Carson," Clay said sharply, "this way—with me."

He moved out of hearing and Milo joined him. Even in his private's dust-stained uniform he still had the air of being a man who had commanded his own regiment. In battle it came back automatically.

"Milo," his brother said, "stop hounding Robey. Are you trying to shatter his nerves so he'll be useless in the fight that's coming?"

"He didn't worry about shattering my nerves when I was in the condemned cell and he came to jeer at me," Milo said grimly. "He is getting a little of his own back."

"Milo, I know damned well you don't mean to shoot him in the back in this action. And I know damned well you never shot that major in the back in Texas—" Something caught in Greer's throat and he coughed. "You heard my estimate to Sergeant Ryan on our position. What did you think of it?"

"Very good."

"You know we're in a worse than bad position. Neither of us are likely to come out of it. So, Milo, I'm asking you to tell me what really happened in Johnsville. I know you're innocent. For God's sake, Milo, before we get knocked off won't you tell me the truth about Milo Kerke of Johnsville? You're my brother, Milo."

"Trooper Carson, Lieutenant Clay." For what seemed an eternity Milo locked his cool gaze with Greer's. Then he spoke slowly. "But Trooper Carson, it so happens, has knowledge of what happened in Johnsville. Milo Kerke Clay came back from the War to a ruined plantation the Yankee carpet-baggers were trying to take away from him, and he killed two of them in a fair fight. But he had to run for it and change his name.

"He got to Texas, to Johnsville, a fine little Southern ranching town where other returned Southerners were trying to get their strayed herds together out of the

brush. They did, and they were on their feet when silver was struck—and again the damned Yankee carpet-baggers swarmed in. Hired gunmen shot the Southern ranchers off their spreads, terrorized the town, and corrupted it to hell. Milo Kerke, a leader of the Southern faction, fought them tooth and nail. They were afraid of him."

Milo's eyes grew cold as steel, and he clamped his lips shut.

"Tell me more about Milo Kerke, Carson," Greer said quietly. "I can imagine what he was up against."

"The Northern carpet-baggers won an election with imported voters and repeaters," Milo said, after a moment, "and Robey went into office on their slate. He was hand-in-glove with the stage robbers who held up the mails and the silver treasure going out. Then, just as this year's new election came up with Milo Kerke on the ticket for town marshal, Washington sent their Intelligence major to investigate the holdups of the United States mails. And Milo Kerke had the information for him. So Milo Kerke had to go, and the major was just another bird to be killed with the same stone.

"Milo Kerke was told by a runner that Major Burgess wanted to see him privately in an alley a block away. He got to the alley in time to hear a shot and see a man run away from the major's body. The man fired at Milo and Milo fired back. The man jumped a fence and vanished, but Milo Kerke saw his steeple hat, and saw that one of his shoulders was higher than the other. Only one man in Johnsville answered that description—Mexican Louis, a malo hombre who was Sheriff Robey's tool. And out of nowhere came Sheriff Robey and two of his crooked deputies and grabbed Milo Kerke as he was standing over the body of Major Burgess, with a shot fired from his gun. The trial was a travesty."

LIEUTENANT CLAY said, through tight lips, "Corrupt judge, packed jury, perjured witnesses? The West has seen plenty of such trials."

"Exactly. Milo Kerke went on the stand in his own defense to testify about the killer. Mexican Louis produced a dozen witnesses to swear he had been in a Mexican cantina the entire night of the murder. So that was that, and Milo Kerke was sentenced to hang. But a file was smuggled in to him and he got away to Fort Otis, where he knew there were Southerners in the garrison."

A vast surge of relief went through Lieutenant Greer Clay.

"Somehow I knew it was that way, Milo. That you were framed." He put his hand out. "Won't you drop that old hatred? Won't you admit—"

Three quick shots cracked from behind the malpais. Three quick shots answered from somewhere in the murky pass.

"Signals, Lieutenant! They're coming!"

Instantly a fusilade broke out from the top of the ridge, and the plunging fire swept into the fort. Bullets thudded into the sand and into the rear of the south wall. There were sharp cries from hit troopers as they slumped.

"Back to the job, Milo!" ordered Greer. "Hell is going to break loose!"

It broke in a shrieking mass of Apaches driving out of the pass as the fire from the repeating rifles on the malpais doubled in fury. Riders came in a straggle, with the braves out for the first coup ahead, and the main attack storming nosily behind them.

"Open fire!" shouted Clay, racing for the wall.

He pulled up with a clear view of the Apache charge. The troopers' fire volleyed down the trough, hitting hard and fast, but it was single-shot carbine fire, and reloading took precious seconds. At the speed with which Long Knife's attack was coming it would carry well up the rise to the fort, if not to the fort itself, and every shot counted.

"Bring up those reserves!" yelled the lieutenant.

Milo plunged forward with his squad. They crouched behind the big wire drum in the wagon gap, triggering steadily. The Apaches still on the malpais flung rifle

lead from the rear, and half the charging riders were shooting from their mounts. Lieutenant Clay felt as if he were in a world of singing metal, but somehow lived while other men were dropping. He was only dimly aware that his own .45 was jumping in his hand.

"Ryan!" he shouted. "Pull all the men you can off the flanks and rush them center!"

The sergeant yelled and men came running from the corners of the fort, but they were not going to reach the center in time. The wild charge of the Apaches was going to carry in!

"Yank that timber check! Lever it under the drum!"

Milo Clay stood erect behind the huge wire drum and his squad leaped to obey him. Two men ripped away the timber that held the wheels and thrust it under the center spool of wire. More men jumped to help them.

"Shoulders to the wheels!" shouted Milo. "Heave!"

The improvised lever came up, the wheels moved under muscles strained to their utmost. The drum began to roll down the rise, slowly at first, then gathering momentum. Inside of thirty yards it was a missile of terrific weight, hurtling down on the Apache charge. It bounced on loose stones, it swayed, but it rolled on.

Mad screaming broke from the storming Apache riders at the base of the rise. Their ponies, bred to the wild, reared in panic at the terrifying unknown object that was rolling down on them. The riders pressed together, but as the big drum loomed on top of them the charge split into two parts, and the drum rolled through and on down the trough.

"Yaaiiee!" The Rebel yell shrilled from Milo as he leaped to the top of the fort wall, waving his hat. "Yaaiieee!"

On the instant the charge split, troopers lining the wall began pouring blasts onto the divided sections. Fighting down panic-stricken mounts and hit at close range by bursts of fire that tore their force apart, the howling Apaches milled in confusion.

Then suddenly there were no Apaches screaming and shooting at the foot of the rise. Only dead and wounded. The riddled main force was racing back for the pass in a huddle.

A LAST burst of carbine fire followed them and as it broke Lieutenant Clay saw one spit of flame that ripped sideward, only yards from Milo, still poised on the wall. It had come from the six-shooter in Sheriff Robey's hand, and had been deliberately aimed at Milo's head!

Part of Milo's cavalry scarf was torn away as the bullet missed his neck by an inch. Instantly Robey swung back to the wall, grabbed up the carbine he had rested against it, and fired after the Indians.

The lieutenant covered the distance between them in a bound. His gun muzzle jammed hard between Robey's shoulder-blades.

"You filthy hound!" he said, in fury such as he had never known before. "Drop your arms and walk to that telegraph pole!"

Robey's carbine fell as Clay ripped the man's six-shooter from his belt. The sheriff's eyes were those of a trapped animal looking on approaching death. He got to his feet and shambled in front of the officer, whose gun muzzle kept on forcing him to the pole.

"Sit down on the ground," Clay ordered. "Put your arms around that pole."

Robey sat down and the lieutenant tore the handcuffs from his belt. The key was hung on one of them by a string. Sharp clicks sounded and Lieutenant Clay stepped back from a helpless Robey, wrists encased in locked steel.

"So you charged Milo Kerke would shoot you in the back in action, did you? So you tried your own hand at murder in battle, did you?"

"Who says so?"

The hardness had crept back into Robey's horselike face. If Clay had meant to shoot him he would have done so instantly. He wouldn't have handcuffed him unless he meant to let him live. The lieutenant could read those thoughts in

the carpet-bagger sheriff's mind, and knew that Robey even now was going to pull cards off the bottom of the deck.

"I say so, Robey," Clay said grimly.

"Look at that wall. Everybody on it was looking at them Injuns running away. Suppose my gun went off accidentally as I pulled it? My word's is as good as yours, Lieutenant Greer Clay, brother of Milo Kerke Clay—or Trooper Carson that you tried to fix up for a getaway as an accessory after the fact to an escaped murderer."

"Yes?" said Clay.

It was almost a relief to have the secret out into the clear at last. He hadn't underestimated this murderous manhunter with a badge.

"So," Robey went on, "there wasn't any Milo Kerke at Retreat when I looked over the whole force in the fort. And there wasn't a new enlistee's service that tallied up to Milo's description. But in your quarters in Bachelor's Hall where Colonel Mott sent me to wash and brush up, there was your shelf of books and your old West Point Cavalry Manual with 'Property of Greer Kerke Clay, Class of 1861' on the fly leaf. No, Lieutenant Clay, you and Milo don't look alike any way at all, but you're brothers.

"The guard was changed at Retreat. I brought drinks at the sutler's for the old guard and found out that a sentry had passed Trooper Carson with the mismatched gray eyes out the gate on a written order from you after I arrived. You had detailed him to this damned outpost next the Border, right where he could jump across it. Then you came out to warn him. Want me to go on?"

"Go on," rasped Clay.

"I rode out here fast and came right onto those Apaches on the malpais ridge. There was no place to run for but this outpost. Now I've got Milo Kerke or—"

"Or what?"

"Or I'll break you clean out of the United States Army, Lieutenant. I'll charge you with aiding his escape if he gets away. I told you you were an accessory after the fact. You'll not only get them shoulder bars you're so proud of ripped off'n you, but you'll crack rock for a right smart term of years. You'll turn Milo Kerke over to me when this battle's over. You'll do what I say because we're both going to live."

"Are we?"

"You'd never shoot an unarmed man like me, Lieutenant, no matter how much you'd like to. I'll say that much for a damned stiff-necked West Pointer."

"*I* will."

The words came softly, and a carbine exploded behind Greer. The bullet whipped past Robey's head and his jaw dropped in horror. Lieutenant Clay turned. Milo and his squad stood behind him, and Milo's carbine was held at his hip.

"Sorry, Lieutenant." Milo grinned at the terror that gripped Robey. "Accident. Being shot at from the back makes me nervous."

"Damn you, Carson!" the officer burst out. "You stay out of this! Do you want me to—"

He switched his head toward the pass.

CHAPTER VI

Two Sleeves—Two Tric

FIRING had died away long since, and, with the moon behind a rack of heavy clouds, darkness had swallowed the fort and the trough leading to the pass. The Apaches on the ridge were wasting no ammunition shooting at targets they could no longer see. Then abruptly from the pass savage whooping began and swelled. It was answered from the far away distance, and rifles began to crack.

"You can read that, Lieutenant Clay?" asked Milo.

"I think I can. And I don't like it." As he listened, the closer rattle of the rifles was answered by many faint poppings. "The Apaches have found something to celebrate about. That would be the ar-

rival of Long Knife's reinforcements from the south—those he called for with his smoke signals. And there are plenty of them."

"You read it right by me, Lieutenant Clay. And if he attacks now with his whole crew in this darkness—"

"We won't be able to see them until their riders are just about on top of us."

"So could I make a suggestion to the lieutenant?" Milo asked.

"Go ahead."

"I take my squad scouting down that trough and climb up on top of the banks. We can spot Long Knife's copper bottoms the minute they clear the pass. Our gunfire will tell you they're coming, long before you can see them from here. We'll tickle them up, then jackrabbit it back to the fort along the banks, out of sight."

"Good idea," said the lieutenant. He paused. "That wire drum was great stuff. It saved our hides."

"I pulled that one on two troops of Union cavalry chasing us while we were raiding the Union rear, wrecking their telegraph." Milo grinned. "Down the grade of the railroad cutting went the drum of wire into 'em and it ended the chase. I know some more tricks I picked up fighting blue bellies that will work as good on copper bottoms."

"All right, you can get going. Sergeant Ryan! Report the casualties."

Ryan came swiftly from the wall. "Fifteen, sir. Nine done in, six wounded. Fighting strength as of now, forty-five." His glance strayed to Robey, sitting on the sand with his wrists locked around the telegraph pole, but no expression was on his face. "No. Forty-four."

"Sheriff Robey made the mistake of fighting on the wrong side to satisfy a grudge, Sergeant," Lieutenant Clay said drily. "He'll stay the way he is from now on. Out of action."

"We'll have plenty of it, if I may say so, sir."

In the east the pale blur of false dawn was mounting in the sky, but the Border wall still was a barrier of black peril. When the desert dawn did come it would burst in incredible, blazing violence. Somehow the long hours of the night had worn away in tension and battle. No reinforcements from the fort were possible with the wire down, and forty-four men were facing Long Knife and his mass of desperate long manes.

"We'll hold as long as we can, Sergeant," the lieutenant said. "I'm hoping against hope the attack won't come before dawn."

"Yes, sir. We can get a large boiling of them in a clear shooting light, sir."

"That's about it. That's all, Sergeant. Keep the men alert. Release the water—all that's left of it."

Ryan strode back to the wall rocklike in the face of the destruction that was coming. B Company would know what it meant when their hoarded water was released to them, for every man to drink his last fill.

In the fast growing light Lieutenant Greer Clay took a last look down the trough of the ravine. At any instant now the long-drawn-out tension would snap, with the explosion of battle. In the murk he had seen motion here and there in the trough, and had taken it for granted that Milo and his squad had been combing the litter left from Long Knife's charge, to be sure no live Apaches were playing dead in their rear.

NOW the trough was still. Milo must have worked far up it. Greer himself had given his orders, had done all he could. The moment the fight began it would be stand and shoot to the last man.

He moved away from the south wall, fumbling for the cigar case in his tunic pocket. He clamped a cigar in his mouth and moved back to the telegraph rock, lighting the smoke in its cover, and stood up with the glowing cigar end cupped in his hand. He wasn't going to give the Apaches on the malpais a chance to take a shot at a light.

"What are you goin' to do with me?" Robey was still sitting on the ground locked to the pole. His harsh voice cracked a little as he asked the question.

"Leave you where you are," said Clay.

"When it gets light them Injuns on the ridge can see me. You going to let them shoot me?"

"You tried to shoot my brother, Milo Kerke Clay, in the back. Should I worry if the Indians shoot you in the back?"

"Why, you—" A foul oath exploded from Robey. "You think you'll ever see that killer brother of yours again? He went out with his damned Johnny Rebs up the ravine, yes. But by now all of 'em have pulled foot to save their skins. He'll never come back into this fort."

"No?"

From the pass the sound of whinnying carried faintly. The crack of a carbine followed, and two more shots trailed it fast. A warning shout came from the south wall, and a man leaped over it and ran fast for Clay.

"Trooper Gwathmey, sir." In the voice was a Virginia accent. "Squad Leader Carson has got up to the mouth of the pass and sends word the Apaches are bunching for a heavy charge. Hear those Injun ponies, sir?"

"I see, Gwathmey. Are Trooper Carson and your squad falling back?"

"Trooper Carson is doing no falling back, Lieutenant." Pride was in the tone of this Army private, clearly born a Virginia gentleman. "Trooper Carson asked me to tell you, sir, that he had long sleeves, and plenty up them. He says to inform you that no charge will ever get past him."

"With seven men? He's mad! Get back out to him, Gwathmey, and tell him to fall back on the fort."

"Too late, Lieutenant! Listen to that charge!"

It was coming in a rising crescendo of drumming hooves and savage yells, and again rifle fire began to rattle at the fort from the malpais in the rear. In minutes only, full dawn would flood the desert. Then the Apaches on the ridge would begin to hack down their targets while the full mounted attack drove up the trough into the faces of the fort's defenders.

"Sergeant Ryan!"

"Yo!"

"Meet me in the center."

Lieutenant Clay started for the south wall. The drumming of oncoming hooves had swelled. The Apaches had burst out of the pass!

"Me?" yelled Robey. "What about me?"

"If you're a praying man, Robey, start now," Clay shot back at him, "If you aren't a praying man, try to learn how damn quick."

At the wall he drew his Colt, staring down the length of the high-banked ravine. Yonder came the dark mass from the defile's maw, and he couldn't even hope to count the numbers of the Apaches. He knew only that he didn't have half enough carbines to stop such a force, blood-mad and in full momentum.

"Volley fire!" he barked. "Again! Again! Again!"

The roar broke, then was repeated, and Greer Clay saw the holes open in Long Knife's charge. But the gaps closed instantly, and the charge rushed on unchecked. Desperate white men shot desperately fast, but they were too few. Men slumped to the sand and twitched, hit by the hellish fire from the rear.

Then the Apaches were so close that the officer could pick out heads and shoulders and tossing manes. Fifty yards more and they would reach the foot of the rise. No power on earth could stop them after that.

"Pour it on!" Clay shouted hoarsely. The volley crashed. "Draw side arms!"

ARMY Colts flashed from holsters. There was no time to reload carbines. In seconds it would be hand-to-hand, with Apaches leaping over the wall from their horses' backs.

In a tight-packed, yelling horde they came, pony pressed against pony. And then suddenly, instead of bare torsos and writhing faces, Lieutenant Clay saw a welter of upended bodies. Legs were sliced out from under them as though by some invisible scythe, the horses were going hooves over head, the front rank riders on their backs were being pitched, howling with shock, into air.

The ruck, storming on behind them, was plunging into a wall of piled horses and braves. Something had stopped the charge cold, and wrecked it on the verge of victory!

"Yaaaiiiieeee!" rose the shrill Rebel yell.

"Good God, Ryan, what's happened out there?" Clay gasped to the sergeant beside him.

"Telegraph wire's happened out there, Lieutenant." It was Gwathmey, speaking coolly. "I told you Trooper Carson sent word the charge wouldn't get past him. There were wire cutters and pliers in his repair kit, and plenty of wire on that drum we rolled down into the ravine. He had us string that wire, fetlock to breast high, all over the trough. Those Injuns hit it like a cattle stampede hitting a barbed wire fence and it wrecked them. There's no getting through that maze."

"Into that pile out there!" barked Clay. "Pistol fire! Ryan, bring up every available carbine from the north wall!"

Savagely the troopers emptied their cylinders in rapid fire, and in a rush the extra carbines poured up. The full fire power of the troop slashed the heaped-up wreckage of Apaches and horses.

"Hand artillery!" rose Milo's voice from above the trough. "Open up!"

Trails of sparks soared out from the high banks, and the red blasts of the explosions began. Fragments of Apaches and ponies blew high, the explosions crashed on, gouging great pits in the welter of broken charge.

"What the—" burst out Lieutenant Clay.

"Trooper Carson's other sleeve, sir," said Gwathmey. "The fort's dynamite. Capped and fused and slung like bombs in the Petersburg trenches." He grinned and drew a match along his trousers, holding out the flame. "Light for the lieutenant's cigar, sir? The lieutenant has let it go out."

"Thanks, Gwathmey," said Greer Clay.

There was nothing further he could do, only stand and watch his men pour their fire into the litter of the Apache charge while Milo's dynamite sticks tore everything they hit into splinters, slamming endlessly on.

Dawn came sweeping in as though a curtain had been lifted, and revealed a scene of utter destruction. The last of the Apaches were kicking their ponies back toward the pass in stricken rout. Out on the desert half a dozen other Apaches who had managed to scale the walls of the ravine and escape the slaughter were running toward the malpais, taking the bad news with them. Rifle fire from the malpais slackened and faded away, with a trail of furious, frustrated yells.

The men in Milo's squad were picking their way back along the banks of the ravine. Milo came sauntering into the fort and drew up before Greer.

"Any further orders, Lieutenant Clay?" he said coolly.

Greer fought for speech. "I never thought—I never figured—I—" He pulled himself together. "You've won for us!"

From behind the eastern end of the malpais ridge a long straggle of riders appeared.

Long Knife's braves on the ridge were running for it, too.

Greer Clay said to his brother Milo, "Just one job for you and I'll see you later. Mount your squad and take them out to the malpais and repair that break in the wire. Tap in on the far end of the wire first and flash the news to the fort. I'll receive on this end."

"Yes, Lieutenant Clay."

The officer snapped his orders to Sergeant Ryan who was watching the dead being laid out, the wounded tended, and cleaning up the backwash of battle. Then Clay lifted his field-glasses and swept the malpais slowly from east to west, holding his gaze carefully on the far end before bringing it back. When he saw Milo and his squad deployed on the bare top of the ridge, and Milo going up the telegraph pole with his repair kit, he turned to Ryan.

"Take over from here, Sergeant. I'm opening up connections with the fort, if possible."

CHAPTER VII

The Last Trick

SLOWLY Lieutenant Clay walked to the telegraph rock. Free from the strain of battle his mind was working rapidly, and his jaw was set hard. Robey looked up at him with a snarl.

"You can let me up now, Lieutenant. The battle's over."

"The whole damn war is over if Long Knife is out there among the Apache dead," rasped the lieutenant.

"So now you got to turn me over that murdering—"

"Shut up!" bit out Clay.

The telegraph key began to clatter on the rock and he read off the Morse code from Milo.

"All spliced up. Fort notified. Are you open at your end?"

Clay sat down at the key. "Open," he ticked off.

"Fort coming through."

"Okay," tapped Clay. "Return here at once."

The dots and dashes began in a steady stream. The lieutenant's pencil began to take down the message on the field form, moving fast. Out on the malpais Milo had descended the pole and he and his squad were trotting back.

"What's that?" demanded Robey as Clay wrote on.

"Something that will surprise you. I am going to read it to you, Robey. It isn't Milo Kerke Clay who will hang, but you."

"Are you loco, you damned whipper-snapper?"

The key went dead, its message finished. Lieutenant stood up from the rock, looming over Robey and holding up the yellow field form. He smiled down at the carpet-bagger and in his smile was menace.

"Listen to this message," signed by Colonel Mott. 'Congratulations on your brilliant action. Full troop ordered immediately to Fort Diamondback to pursue remnants of Long Knife's forces. Hold your position. Instantly arrest Sheriff Robey, now out with you, for murder of Major Burgess in Texas. Telegram just in from Johnsville stating Spanish Louis, stabbed in brawl, made dying confession he was hired by Robey to kill major in situation making Milo Kerke victim of circumstances. Spanish Louis revealed whole framed-up plot, and six witnesses severely questioned confessed to perjury on orders of Robey. Return Robey to Fort Otis under armed escort for trial in Johnsville.' "

"Spanish Louis! That dirty, double-crossing rat!" Robey's mouth gaped and the muscles of his cheeks twitched violently. The truth was written clear in his bulging eyes.

"So it was you and not Milo Kerke, after all." Clay looked up. "Trooper Carson, over here. Halt your squad."

Coming through the fort wall Milo waved and veered his mount to his brother, swinging from saddle. Greer held the telegram out to him.

"Read this. I've just read it to Sheriff Robey, our prisoner here."

Milo's eyes swept the sheet almost at a glance.

"Aaah!" was all he said.

Greer held out the key to the handcuffs. "Free him. I want his hands loose for something. Step this way, Robey."

Freed from the steel, Robey scrambled to his feet, moving like a jerky puppet.

"Now, Robey, on this telegraph pad write down a brief confession containing the facts that came in over the wire. Make it short and make it fast."

"Write a confession and put the rope around my own neck?" snarled Robey. "You think I'm out of my mind?"

"Spanish Louis' death-bed statement and your perjured witnesses' retractions are enough to hang you, Robey. But I'm going to make a trade with you."

"Trade?" A gleam of hope crept into Robey's eyes.

"Unfortunately, if you go to trial, the fact will come out that I planned Milo Kerke's escape when he was a convicted

murderer. I am exactly the accessory you threatened to expose, and although this business has come out differently, I still am guilty. The Army is tough with its officers, even on such a technicality. The least I could expect would be a demand for my resignation, the end of my career in the only job I ever could care for. So I'm saving your hide to save my career."

ROBEY stared, unbelieving.

"Huh? Saving my hide?"

"You are now under arrest by me. Write and sign that confession, jump onto Kerke's horse behind you and make your escape for California, to the west. Long Knife's braves went east. No one will fire at you, and I'll report that you took me by surprise with your getaway. Refuse to write that confession, Robey, and by heaven, I'll send you back to Fort Otis handcuffed, with Milo Kerke here as your armed guard. Alone!"

"It will be a pleasure, Lieutenant Clay." Milo patted the butt of his holstered .45. "I shall see that he gets there neatly laid across his sadle."

"He'd shoot me a mile from this fort," panted Robey. "Then report I tried to escape."

"Write, Robey."

"I'll write."

Robey took the pencil and it traveled across the paper. Cold sweat ran down his forehead, but he wrote on. He scrawled his signature. The lieutenant took the paper from him, and scanned it quickly.

"This will stand in any court of law, Robey. Here's your gun." He lifted it from the telegraph rock where it lay. "Now damn you, get onto that horse and go!"

Robey swung into the saddle of Milo's mount which was standing a few yards away, gathered up the reins, and his features twisted in a last glare of fury. Then he trotted for a gap in the wall, passed through it unopposed, and loped away onto the desert stretching endlessly into the west under the blue, free sky.

Greer Clay lifted his field-glasses and through their long-distance lenses stared at Robey, riding now a full quarter of a mile from the west wall of the fort where he and Milo stood. No one had paid any attention to Robey's getaway. The tired troopers were still too busy with the last of their clean-up. Robey rode easily, with the air of a man released from anxiety, heading into a new life where his ruthless gun would again bring him to the top.

"So the rotten yellow buzzard goes free, Lieutenant Clay," said Milo.

"Yes?" said Greer. He turned his glasses onto the mesquite-edged outcropping of malpais that ran into the desert from the end of the ridge ahead of Robey's course and some two hundred yards from him. He would be pasing it in a matter of seconds. He extended the glasses to Milo. "Focus on that mesquite clump at the base of the ridge and tell me what you see."

Milo pressed the glasses to his eyes. "Motion. Flash of red, and sun sparkles off whitish metal. Robey's abreast of the clump."

"And who wears turkey red headcloths, and who wears silver armbands that reflect the sun?"

"Apaches! There's a nest of them stayed behind when the others broke east. There they come! Hell of a tall, red-headbanded chief out in front!"

"So does Robey go free? Pass me back the glasses, Milo."

Shrill whoops carried to the fort wall. Racing at wild velocity, the dozen Apaches who had burst from the mesquite tore for their quarry. Robey jammed spurs and his mount leaped into a gallop, but the Indian ponies were faster. With lances and throwing axes upraised, the Apaches were hurtling for him, cutting him off.

Spurts of smoke burst from Robey's gun, the slap of his shots sounded faintly. Then in a swarm the Apaches were on him and he disappeared. The glasses brought incredibly close into vision the tall, cruel-featured Indian who held Robey's Texas sombrero high in savage triumph on the point of a two-foot long knife, his mouth wide and screeching.

The red band around his forehead

opened up as a carbine cracked at Lieutenant Clay's elbow, and the heavy slug blew it apart. Stiffened on his pony's back by the shock, the tall Indian came erect, then he swayed and slid laxly to the sand, blasted into extinction. The Indian pack shrieked in wild fury. Two of them leaped to ground and laid the body across a pony. In a whirl of dust they were gone, leaving a dark blur on the sand so transfixed with lances it looked like a porcupine.

"They got Robey, Milo," Greer said. "And you got Long Knife!"

ELBOWS braced on the wall, carbine held as though in a vise, Milo grinned.

"So you knew they were out there waiting," he said. "Long Knife must have led his battle from behind the malpais himself."

"Yes," Greer admitted. "I knew the Apaches were waiting. I spotted them when I was sweeping the malpais with my glasses while you were on the way to it. You were quite safe from them where you were. You're clear, Milo, to buy your way out of the Army and go back to Johnsville."

"I'll do just that," said Milo, lowering his carbine. He drew a long breath. "There's a mighty fine young woman waiting there for me, the widow of a Confederate officer. Robey had his eye on her, but you can figure what kind of advances *he* made. I told him I'd horsewhip him on the main street at high noon if he ever came near her cottage again. From then on I was a marked man. Well, he got his deserts. He was executed by Long Knife instead of by the hangman, so it was all right for you to let him go."

"I had to let him go. I didn't dare have him taken back to Johnsville. He would have repudiated his confession and you would have been right where you were before."

"Against Spanish Louis' confession and the testimony of those witnesses who recanted?"

Greer smiled. "Spanish Louis never confessed. Neither did those perjured witnesses recant, Milo. I pulled a bluff on Robey with an empty gun. I figured he couldn't read Morse code. The telegram from the fort was nothing but routine after-battle instructions. You'd told me the truth about the major's murder. I simply wrote it down as a telegram coming in from Otis and hit Robey in the jaw with it. When you get back to Johnsville with Robey's confession, Spanish Louis and those perjurers ought to crack up and squeal, to get off lightly."

"I'll be damned!"

"I was sure Robey would leap at a trade, so I pretended to fear an end to my Army career as an accessory to your escape. He didn't know I'd left my resignation back at Headquarters to be given to Colonel Mott at noon today. Of course, I couldn't aid a major's killer to get away and stay on in the Army. But I was willing to stake everything I have in this world, Milo, that you were innocent, and I meant to get you clear and go to Johnsville and try to get to the truth."

"You resigned from the Army to get me clear?"

Greer nodded. "As of the end of this detail. A wire to Sergeant Major Crouch and he tears up the envelope I gave him, and it never existed. I put back the money I drew for your escape, take back my check, and my part in the incident is over. I go on with my Army career and you go on with yours in Johnsville."

"Yes."

"Milo," said Greer, "at least we've fought together, side by side, in battle. We've been co-commanders together. I led the defense and you led the offense, and you won for us. You're not Trooper John Carson any more—you're Milo Kerke Clay, my brother. I'm asking you again, can't we—" He choked. "Won't you say something, Milo?"

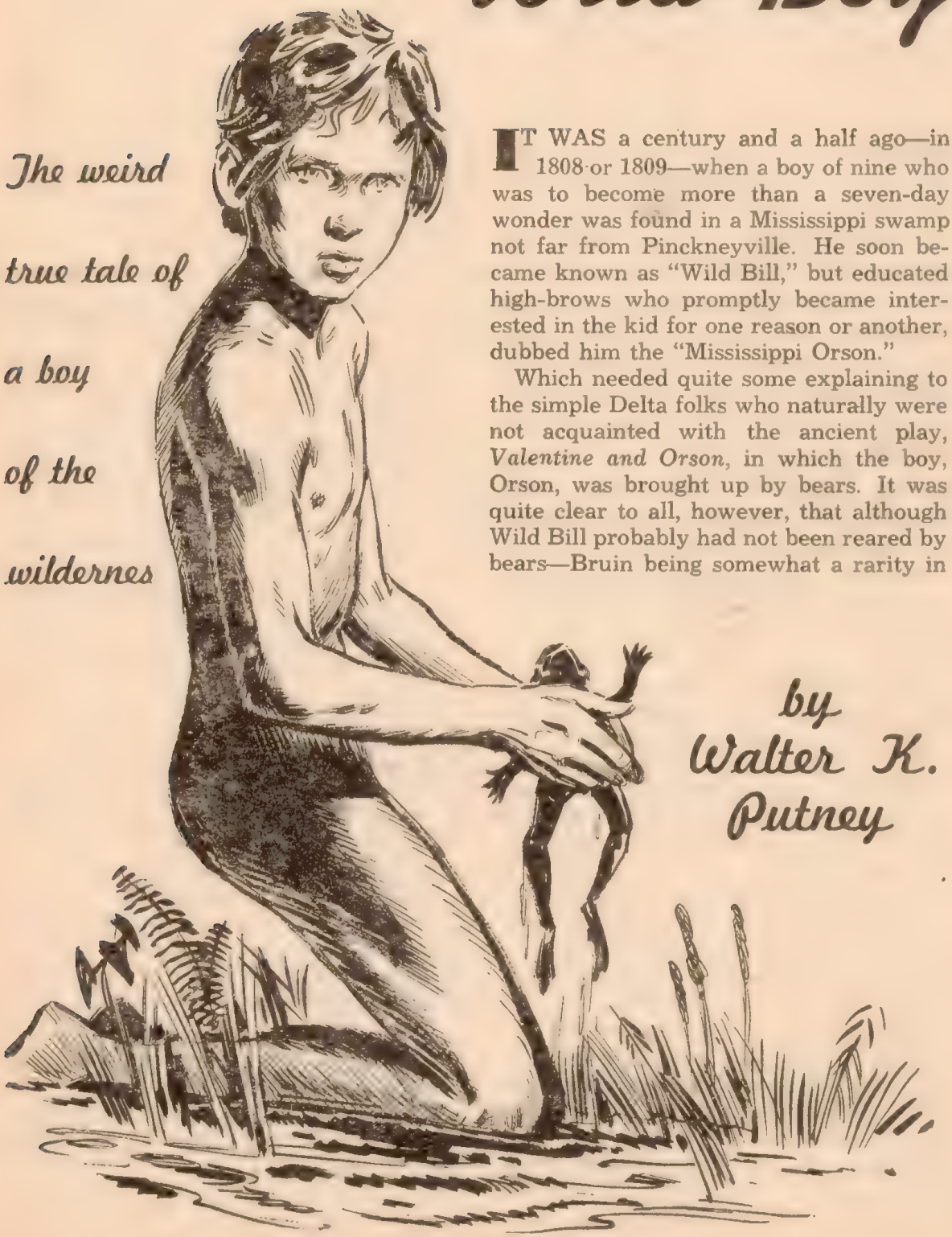
Into Milo's bitter face crept a light that had been years in coming. He held out his hand.

"Young Greer," he said, "I am sure proud to have raised you."

Their hands met in a grip that Greer Clay knew would never be broken again.

Wild Boy

The weird true tale of a boy of the wilderness



by Walter K. Putney

IT WAS a century and a half ago—in 1808 or 1809—when a boy of nine who was to become more than a seven-day wonder was found in a Mississippi swamp not far from Pinckneyville. He soon became known as "Wild Bill," but educated high-brows who promptly became interested in the kid for one reason or another, dubbed him the "Mississippi Orson."

Which needed quite some explaining to the simple Delta folks who naturally were not acquainted with the ancient play, *Valentine and Orson*, in which the boy, Orson, was brought up by bears. It was quite clear to all, however, that although Wild Bill probably had not been reared by bears—Bruin being somewhat a rarity in

Mississippi—he had acquired his early education either from watching or associating with some kind of an animal, and followed his teachings implicitly.

Some animal that was fleet of foot, too, and cagy. For not only could young Bill outrun any man who chased him, but he could swim expertly, and could hide his trail and double back more expertly than any Indian.

Waif of the Swamps

Wild Bill's presence in the swamp was first noted when hunters saw the barefoot prints of a boy in the wildest and most isolated terrain, naturally arousing curiosity and speculation. The footprints were seen so many times that men began looking for the boy who made them—and finally they saw him. He was small, and agile. From a secluded spot the men watched him catch frogs and eat them. They saw him run and jump, as if amusing himself as some animals do when alone.

They called to him then but, alarmed, he fled at a pace they could not hope to challenge. They were near enough, though, when he reached a lake, to see him plunge in head-first. He swam under water for some distance, and when he finally came up for air was too far away for them to reach him.

When this report was circulated the settlers, though somewhat inclined to be skeptical, at last became so aroused that they determined to capture the swamp boy. No one could say whether he was white or Indian. At the distance from which he had been seen all that could be said was that he was very dark, his entire body tanned a deep brown. Yet his face was not like that of any Indian youth his discoverers had ever seen.

Traps were set for him, but always he eluded them. Again men in hiding saw him from a distance, but at the least rustle of bushes he would flee and take refuge in that lake.

One day he was seen sitting under a persimmon tree, eating fruit. Already his stalkers had seen him eating the raw fish, frogs, turtles and small animals he caught. Several separate parties closed in on him, but he saw them in time. Darting through brush and trees, he doubled back to his lake again and dived into it the instant before the nearest boy-hunter could grasp him.

The Boy-Hunters

It seemed to be no manner of use for mere men to try to outwit that boy. All agreed to that, so they put dogs on his trail. For days that chase went on, but it was not until the swamp boy dropped from exhaustion that he finally was captured.

He was about nine years old, beautifully muscled, lean and willowy, and so toughened by his life in the wilds that it took three men to bind him and bring him back to the settlement. Then it was discovered that he could not speak a word. He made sounds like some wild animal, and whined like a dog when he was frightened, or was grateful for some kindness. He snarled, growled, and tried to bite any who approached until he seemed to realize, in the manner of a wild animal, that nobody meant to hurt him.

Seen close, his complexion was florid, and his eyes were brilliant. His hair was sandy, and long.

The boy, taken to Woodville, was placed in the care of a family named Rollins. Benjamin Rollins, the family patriarch, was a religious man, and a kind one. He suceeded in getting the boy to accept food and clothes. Yet the waif from the swamps showed such a marked distaste for anything cooked that he had to be allowed to eat the raw meat he preferred.

It took a long time, and great patience, but gradually his habits were changed, and although he could not be called civilized, at least he was tamed. It was more weeks before he was permitted to walk around unfettered, and to go about town by himself. But even then someone followed to watch over him.

The next stop was to try to teach him to speak English, but it was an effort both

for him and for his benefactors. He could pronounce monosyllables, but even two-syllable words were too much for him. This never changed throughout his short life.

No Accounting for Tastes

Wild Bill was unanimously chosen as a name for him, since of course no one could make a guess whence he came, or anything about his family. There was no psychiatrists or other scientists at that time to study his case, so all efforts were centered upon making him a real boy and a happy one. Yet he never again knew the real happiness he had known in the freedom of the swamps, and it was plain that he constantly longed for his old wild life.

At every opportunity he would slip away, doff his clothes and run around naked, catching frogs and fish and eating them with relish. His small hunting sprees excited and elated him, and he loved excitement in any form. He was never afraid of anything.

He was, in fact, more like a wild animal that had unwillingly been tamed than he would ever be like a normal boy. He had a wicked temper, and showed it when he was crossed.

When he played with children of his own age he would slap and punch them, if provoked—and nothing even the kindest mentor could do or say, could ever change that.

Chip on His Shoulder

As he grew older, he became obstinate and quarrelsome, and seemed always to be looking for a fight.

When he did fight he would growl like a jungle beast.

By the time Wild Bill was fourteen he was as strong as any man in Woodville, and would not hesitate to oppose even the biggest who dared to oppose him. He also found strong liquor, and discovered it to be so much to his liking that everywhere people had to hide their store.

He also had a craving for sweets, and would slyly enter a house at night just to satisfy his appetite for sweet things. Woodville citizens had constantly to be on guard against his marauding.

It was a still longer time before any of his story could be pieced together—not until at last he had laboriously learned to understand what was said to him, and to speak with some coherence. Then, bit by bit, he told of his dim recollection of coming down the river on a flat boat with some others—his father and mother among them, he thought. Something or somebody had attacked the boat.

Men had been killed, and his father wounded. His father had shot his mother so she would not be captured. He always had thought wild animals had attacked the flat boat—yet he had called the first Indian he had seen in Woodville a wild animal, and had been afraid of him. During the massacre the boy had hidden and had not been discovered. When the boat drifted ashore he had run into the swamp where he had lived until the settlers had found him.

His Final Plea

Wild Bill became more and more unmanageable as he grew older. He assaulted men and women and even children in order to get sweets and liquor. He would leave town for days at a time, but not until later was it discovered that he had gone back to his favorite sleeping place inside a hollow tree. It seemed to give him the greatest pleasure to sleep as he had when he had been the wild boy of the swamps.

That tree probably had saved him many times from marauding animals. In warm weather, though, he would head for the cane brakes, and for his favorite old resting places there.

Wild Bill was only about eighteen when he died around 1818.

He never would have grown to be a real man by civilized standards, because his early wild life had become so much a part of him.

His last plaintive plea before he headed for a Better Land was for some raw frogs to eat.

"You saw it, *Viejo?*" he asked

THE KILLER

By ROBERT VIRGIL

SQUATTING in the sun-ribbed shadow of the south corral gate, Juan saw it happen. He watched the patron, young Señor Jim Mayes, stride from the house and confront the grinning, hating devil-man, Tom Laster. Their angry words came to him faintly, upwind, and he saw the hands of the two slash downward and rise again erupting flame and smoke.

Both fired as one. But it was the evil one, Tom Laster, who sprawled in the dust of the ranch yard and lay twisting for a moment in the warm sunshine.

Juan rose and shuffled forward, nodding in approval as he reached his patron.

"It is good, Señor Jim," he said in Spanish. "Now this man will make no more trouble."

Young Mayes raised his eyes to the old Mexican who stood across Laster's body from him. The bent, withered body was clad in cast-off clothing from his own household.

It is better sometimes that the dead stay dead . . . .

The old man's beard and sweeping mustachios were white, grown that way in the service of the men of the Mayes family. Jim and his father before him. He smiled in grateful acceptance of the old man's loyalty.

"You saw it, *viejo?*" he asked.

"*Si,* Senor Jim, I saw. Truly, had you not killed him, he would have killed you."

Mayes nodded.

"Yeah, there won't be any trouble with the law. You knew I had ordered him off the place after—after what happened?"

Juan's voice flickered sadly toward the ranch house in confirmation. Mayes also glanced that way as he spoke again, lowering his voice.

"*Viejo,* would it be untrue to say that we had a fight only because I fired him? Will you keep silent about—about Laster and my wife? She will forget. She did not really love him. Will you do this?"

The old one nodded again, the shadow of the wide-brimmed sombrero bobbing up and down on his chest. The young Señor Mayes was a good man, too good for the woman he had brought home to share in the heritage molded from these wide, once-barren plains by his father and—yes, by Juan himself.

Juan's eyes dropped to his huaraches, worn and broken, so that a few stray toes were boldly exposed. He wished he might presume to give the patron a few words of advice.

ALL men have loved, even a *viejo* like himself. In the many, many years past there had been a beautiful, young señorita with raven hair and flashing dark eyes who had made a pet of the heart of the young Juan. But a rich *caballero,* a handsome, dashing devil, had turned her pretty head.

Ah! There had been a wonderful battle of knives, bodies strained in combat, screams, and much blood. In winning, young Juan had lost. The *caballero* had been of a powerful family. So Juan had ridden north where he had met the first Señor Mayes, himself a young man then, futilely trying to wrest a living from an arid, lonely land.

The young Señor Mayes of that day, and the one of now, often became confused in the old mind. But were they not truly one? And was not he, Juan, a part of them? Could he shame them by speaking of the love between the woman, Señor Mayes, and the *bastardo,* Laster? No, and he nodded again in mute token to the rancher, that he would not betray them.

"Thanks, Juan," said Mayes, and his voice was soft with friendship. It fed the glow that was a constant warmth in the old chest. "Get a wagon, please, and take Laster's body to town. I'll follow as soon as I've had a talk with my wife."

Juan nodded and watched the lank, strong stride as this friend, and son of a friend, walked to the house and passed out of sight. Then he went to the barn and began preparations for the journey to town.

He had known of the trouble from the day when Laster had first come to the ranch to work. *Aie-e-e,* how Señora Mayes' eyes had flashed at the dark handsomeness of the man! As bright as the flash of the guns that had brought an end to it all. Juan had known this would happen, from the very start, but Señora Mayes had not.

They had been gloomy days for the old Mexican. Had he not seen with his own eyes how the two had smiled at each other when the young patron was not looking? And there had been that first terrible day when Laster had come in from building fences, knowing that Señor Mayes was riding far on the other side of the ranch. He had gone into the house and stayed long.

"Ah, how sorrow comes to burden the heart of a good man," Juan muttered as he shoved the wagon tongue into position.

He had tried to show the patron these things. Had he not taken him to see the fences Laster had been building on the very day following the man's treachery? He had. And had the Señor Mayes been blind that he could not see that the new fences had not progressed as far as they should have in the hours supposed to be devoted to them?

There had been the day when Juan had ridden with the rancher, inspecting the herds. How carefully he had planned it! He had chosen the right time to sway in the saddle and cry out as if in pain. Señor Mayes had come, worried and fearful, and they had ridden back to the ranch house, as Juan had

known they would, with the patron's arm about his shoulder and soft, kind words in his ear to shame him for his trickery.

Yes, they had found the *perro,* Laster, in the house. But he, too, had pretended to be ill. They had found him stretched on the couch, his hands clasped at his flat middle, groaning as though ten thousand devils dwelled in his insides. The señora had said she was getting cool cloths for the man's heated face. But only Juan, in the excitement, had noticed the dishevelment of the dress worn by the patron's wife.

"It must have ben something in the food," the Señor Mayes had said. "Both of you had better go to bed."

BUT Juan, angry with the trickery of the devil, Laster, had turned and shuffled from the house in miraculous recovery, kicking at a stone and bruising his exposed toes. Laster's illness had lingered for two days, while the trusting patron had ridden far out over the ranch doing his work for him.

"*Aie-e-e,* truly the lover is blind!" Juan muttered again, as he petted and cajoled the team into the harness.

But he had brought it about, at last, a thing of which he was not proud. All tact, all careful effort to pretend ignorance so that the young señor would not be embarrassed, had been cast aside. Juan had brought him to the house in mid-afternoon and shown him where Laster's horse was hidden in a clump of mesquite.

He had made the patron enter the house in the manner of a cat creeping upon a corn-nibbling mouse in the barn. Then he had pointed to the closed door of the bedroom, turned and walked away, weighted with the shame and sorrow of his friend.

He had gone to the adobe shack that squatted in the prairie. There in his house he had sat to think of this trouble.

But that had been yesterday, and this was today. And the trouble was gone!

Juan hummed a tune, an old lover's song, and supplied a few lusty words to it from his own feelings as he completed the harnessing and conducted the horses to where Laster lay in the dust. Yes, he shared this secret. But was it not safe with him, as safe as if it were closed in the grave of the first Señor Mayes?

"We have seen this thing, *hermanitas,*" he told the horses as he led them. "But we will say nothing. Young hearts will soon heal their scars and there will be laughter. The laughter will last"— he nodded grimly—"unless the patron is so foolish to bring another man like this to his home. Then again there will be tears."

Juan rolled the body over. The bullet had not come out. There was much blood on Laster's chest. It was evil blood, truly. By the very color of it one could tell.

He began struggling with the body, trying to get it into the wagon, and the ranch house door slammed behind him. Mayes came to help. They laid the body out in the back of the wagon and Juan climbed stiffly onto the seat and took the reins.

"Juan," Mayes said suddenly, "where are the clothes I brought you last week?"

The old man shifted uncomfortably.

"They are there," he said, nodding in the direction of the adobe hut. "They await a holiday. Such finery is not for work. And—"

"The clothes I brought you were work clothes," Mayes interrupted sternly.

Juan went on blandly as though the patron had remained silent. "And these clothes that you discard just when they become comfortable, are they not good?"

"And what about the money I gave you for shoes?" Mayes demanded.

"*Aie-e-e!* If one did not know the young patron, one would think he was truly angry." Juan looked at the worn huaraches. "The money is safe," he said. "I will use it when I need new shoes."

And on the footboard of the wagon, the free brown toes wiggled in consternation that they might be cramped by new shoes. Mayes grinned.

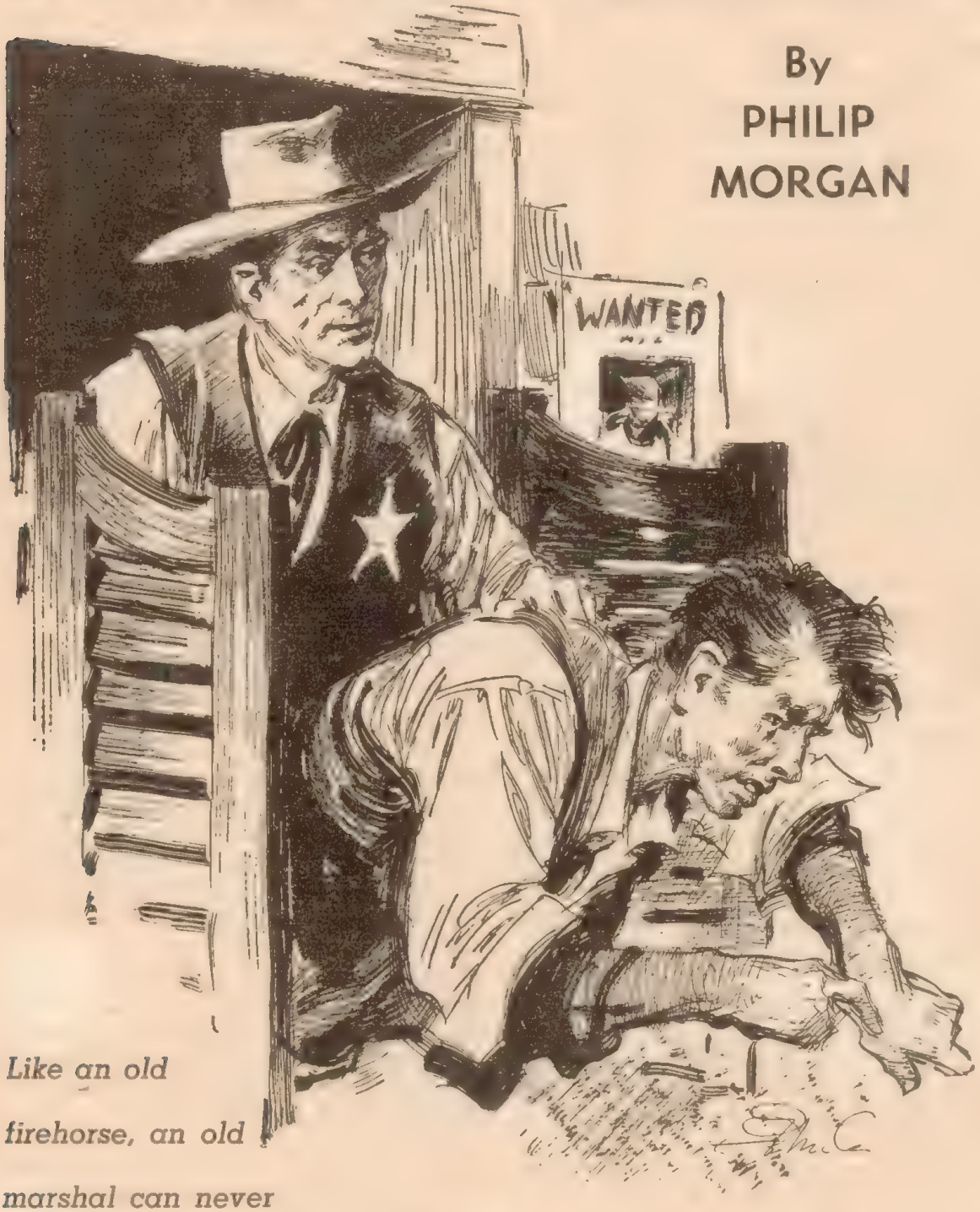
"I'll see you in town, *compadre.*" He nodded toward Laster's body. "Take him to the sheriff first, then to the undertaker's."

JUAN prompted the horses into movement. It was three hours in the warm sunshine to the town. The old lover's tune came to his lips again. Already the young

(Continued on page 112)

The Marshal of Comanche

By PHILIP MORGAN



Like an old firehorse, an old marshal can never really get free of the traces

MARK KIRBY came awake, but lay still, his eyes shut, his breathing unvaried from that of sleep, letting his senses come alive, deciding if danger had brought him from his light sleep.

When he was reasonably sure no one was with him in the small, dingy hotel room, he opened his eyes and swung up onto the side of the bed. He yawned prodigiously and stretched, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

Mark Kirby was a big man, slabs of muscle lying across his shoulders and knots of it lifting on his sides at every movement. His hair was black, with a few gray hairs beginning to show above his temples. All of his features were large and his face had the same hard quality as cut granite. Flanking his rather long nose, his blue eyes bored straight out at the world with the chill authority of shotgun barrels.

Looking into those eyes had dissuaded many a man from pulling a gun. They had been the wise ones.

But there were twenty others who lay buried in shallow graves along Mark Kirby's back trail, men who had tried to beat him to a gun. All of those killings had been legal, for he had packed a star, but sometimes at night he dreamed he saw those faces again. On such nights he didn't sleep.

Standing up, he moved across the room to the wash bowl, with the ease of a man who is never off-balance. He washed, splashing and blowing, then applied lather to his wet face. Holding out the straight-edged razor, he smiled grimly when his hand held steady before his critical gaze.

He might be getting a little old for the job, but no one could deny his nerves were still good.

Shaving, he thought about today, and about what it would bring, and wondered that it seemed no different than any other. And this hotel room might have been any of a thousand he had occupied along the trail.

His gun hung from the back of a chair, within easy reach from the bed. On the seat of the chair lay two Mexican cheroots—for nights when he couldn't sleep. He smiled again, remembering the lively black-eyed half-breed girl in Taos who had taught him to use them.

THE trappings were the same as always, but the day was different. For today he took off the star, turned it over to another man, and rode out. Only this time he wouldn't be riding on to another job of town-taming. This time he was quitting. After fifteen long, hard dangerous years he was through.

Tonight, at six o'clock, when he turned the star over to young Tom Shields, the career of Mark Kirby, gunfighting marshal, was done. It was time, because he was forty and his reflexes had slowed some. If he stayed on the job, some glory-hungry kid would kill him.

But he didn't like the thought of leaving the job, just the same. After fifteen years, the game was in his blood and it was going to take a long time to get it out. He felt a mild resentment toward Tom Shields, but this was foolish. The kid hadn't wanted the job.

Mark dressed slowly. He put on his gunbelt and spent some time adjusting the holster until it felt right. The last thing he did was check the loads in his gun. This attention to small details had kept him alive well past the allotted life span of peace officers in the West, and he didn't intend to forget on this last day.

Ready for the day, he went downstairs and took his usual table against the rear wall of the dining room. The waitress saw him and brought him his huge breakfast without any order. Outside on the porch after the meal, he lit the day's first cigar and carefully surveyed this town he had bossed for two years.

Comanche, on the flat sweep of the Nebraska plain, was a trail town, a town that knew a rough and perilous existence twelve hours a day and slept off excesses the other twelve. Away from it the prairie rolled endlessly to the far rim of the world.

This early in the morning, the town still slumbered peacefully. A few wagons moved along the street and here and there a woman moved doing her daily shopping. It was hard to believe that a few hours from now trail hands and punchers from the nearby ranches would sweep in

and the wild seeking for pleasure would begin.

It was an old pattern to Mark Kirby and not a pretty one, yet he would miss it. There was a raw energy, a sense of excitement that always pulsed under the thin hide of this town.

Moving down the walk, he stopped at Faro Neal's Buffalo Gal Saloon and found the dapper, slender Neal counting the previous night's take, his thin face serious in repose. He smiled at Mark and went on with his counting. Mark came up to lean on the bar and wait patiently for this man who was his only real friend in town.

Faro was the one man in town who neither feared Mark Kirby, nor felt contemptuous of him. He recognized the importance of the job the marshal was doing and appreciated how tough it was. Like Mark, Faro saw the sordid side of life in this town, but he had not let it make him cynical or bitter. He did not feel better than the man who had to roll in the dirt with outlaws and trail drivers and punchers to keep them in line. Most of the businessmen did. They recognized the need for the marshal, but felt that his social standing was below theirs. That rankled in Mark's soul.

Neal finished counting and put the money in the safe behind the bar. Reaching below the bar, he brought out a bottle of good Irish whisky and poured two glasses. Each took a glass and each held it a moment, watching the color, then tossed off the drink.

Mark breathed a sigh of satisfaction. "I always knew there was some reason for you being here. It's to give me a drink of good whisky once in awhile. I'm going to miss this."

"The best in the house," Faro replied. "Nothing too good on your last day, Mark. How does it feel to hang up the gun?"

MARK frowned slightly. "It should feel fine. Ever since I started, I've always said I'd quit the first time I thought I was slowing down. I think I am, so I'm quitting, but it ain't easy."

[*Turn page*]

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"Maybe you're wrong. You still handle this town plenty well. You keep things in line. The word is out that nobody runs wild in Comanche. I hate to see you quit. This town is still pretty raw, and it could go straight to hell once you pull out."

"I don't owe the town anything," Mark said with a trace of bitterness. "The so-called decent people speak to me, but they never invite me to their homes. You and me are a couple of mavericks. Let somebody else worry about the town."

"Not quite right," Faro replied quickly. "The town is more important than a few business men. It's not a bad town."

"Sure, sure, I know, but it makes me sick sometimes. All of 'em come running once there's trouble, but as soon as it's over they don't know me. Let them worry about the town from now on. I'm through."

As he spoke the saloon doors swung open and Mark wheeled with instinctive caution. When he saw who it was, he came away from the bar, his attention immediately sharpened.

"I heard you was quitting, Kirby, and I figured to drop around and say so-long. We're sure going to miss you."

This Gila Thompson who spoke was a wild young gunman who had a bad reputation in the Territory. He had got out of line only once in Comanche and that time Mark had knocked him down, taken his gun, and dragged him off to jail.

The insult had been eating at Gila's pride ever since. He had made threats behind Mark's back, but had never had the guts to back them up when Mark faced him. Now there was a thin sneer on his lips as he stood gently rocking back on the heels of his high-heeled boots.

Mark saw that Gila had been drinking, but he didn't feel like making excuses for anyone today. He moved forward at once, hearing Faro's sharp protest.

"Don't be a sucker, Mark!"

The marshal didn't stop and the gunman's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed to a catlike attention. Gila's hand was near the butt of his low-slung gun and his face showed the strain of inner struggle. He tried to find the courage to pull on this big man, and failed.

Legend defeated him and cold fact defeated him. Mark Kirby was a fighter, one of the best, and Gila had never before faced a real fighter. Gila was weak, with no bottom to him, treacherous and dangerous, but Mark knew him and gambled on his weakness.

Coming in, he hit Gila with a solid right to the jaw that threw the small outlaw back against the wall. The force of the blow stunned him and he hung against the wall, his hands in front of his face in a feeble effort at protection. Mark closed and caught him by the seat of the pants and the back of the shirt. He lifted him, walked to the batwing doors and threw the young badman into the street.

"After this, don't talk smart to your betters, Gila," he advised.

Gila sat up in the street's dust, hate blazing in his reddened eyes. His voice shook with that hate.

"Some day I'll get even for this, Kirby."

Mark turned back into the saloon without answering. Gila rose slowly, painfully, and limped away.

Inside, Faro looked reprovingly at Mark. "You didn't have to do that."

"There's only one way to handle that kind. Keep 'em beaten down, keep 'em scared. Otherwise they'll catch you off-guard and kill you."

NEAL shook his head. "That's all right for you. You can give him his choice of any way he wants to fight and beat him, but Tom Shields can't. You're through today, and now Gila will take his spite out on Comanche. I wish you hadn't tromped on him so hard."

"If Shields can't handle the job, he shouldn't take it. A man that can't take care of himself has no business packing a star. I've run those tough hombres for two years and I'll keep running 'em until I leave. What they do after that is somebody else's worry."

Kirby turned sharply and walked from the saloon. Behind him, Faro Neal shook his head.

Mark walked around this town he knew so well, going over every inch that he covered on his three nights a week patrols. The walk took him down Ute, past Big Sal's and Frenchie Loraine's, and several of the girls, taking a little sunlight on the porches, waved to him. He tipped his hat with the same aloof courtesy he showed every woman. He had no quarrel with these girls, as long as they kept their place, which was off Main, and they had long ago learned to obey his few rules. Those who had disobeyed were no longer here. They had received free tickets out of Comanche on the first stage.

The smoke of the marshal's thin cigar trailed behind him in the still air as he moved at a leisurely pace through shantytown, where dwelt the Mexicans and the town's poor whites. Here also, he spoke to several, and here also there was a dropping off of conversation as he passed.

There was about him a coldness, a plain indication of power, that caused chills to run down spines. These people respected Mark Kirby because they feared him, and that was what he wanted. That way he stayed alive.

At the end of his long swing, he was in the business district. He stopped at each store for a brief word of parting with the owner. All wished him well and thanked him for a fine job, but there was no real warmth in their words.

He realized again, as he had so often, that a man packing a star was a lonely man. Tom Shields would be able to keep his place among the town's select, but Tom Shields would not be able to put the fear of death in the town's wild element.

Finished with his walk, he stopped at his office and stood in the center of the floor, really seeing it for the first time. The walls were of plain board and reward dodgers were tacked all over them. There was a pencil scene of branding by an artist who had more energy than skill. A rack of rifles hung against one wall and a saddle lay carelessly in a corner under the moth-eaten head of a deer. At the

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back, a door led to the three-cell jail.

Mark Kirby cursed suddenly and wheeled from the office, driven by an unexplained restlessness. He had wanted to quit for a long time and didn't understand the way he was feeling now.

He was at loss for anywhere to go. Finally deciding on the hotel porch, he crossed the street and settled in a chair with a week-old copy of the Denver paper, his feet cocked on the rail.

Even here, he was not completely at ease. His eyes constantly veered from the paper to sweep the street with a careful vigilance, never forgetting that there were men in this town who would have given anything to have him dead. This constant alertness was the price he paid for his life. This was what finally got a man—this ever-present tension, this never-ceasing need for caution, until one day he forgot that need, or ignored it, and died.

The rest of the morning passed slowly. At noon, he went inside and ate his dinner, returning at once to the chair. It was two o'clock of a sun-bright afternoon then, and Faro Neal was suddenly hurrying up the street toward him. Mark put down the paper, not having seen a word in it for an hour anyhow, and waited for his friend in unsmiling silence.

FARO was in a hurry, which was unusual, for Faro was the least excitable of men. Something was wrong, Mark sensed. He felt a faint tingle of anticipation before he remembered that he had only a few hours left as marshal. There was going to be no trouble for him on this last day.

Faro came onto the porch and dropped into a chair beside Mark.

"There's trouble brewing, Mark. Gila Thompson's down in shantytown now drinking tequila and getting meaner'n hell. He swears that as soon as you pull out he's going to rip this town up by the roots and sprinkle it clear across Wyoming. Pete Manson and Lace Taterell are with him. I don't like it at all."

"No concern of mine," Mark said. "I hand over the star at six, take the stage, and I'm through. After that, it's a fast ride to the Big Horn Basin and my ranch. You better tell Shields about Gila."

"Shields can't handle Gila and you know it!" Faro replied harshly. "Gila's too fast for him. You could stop it right now, by walking down there and throwing those boys in the clink until they sober up. They're scared of you, Mark, but they ain't scared of Tom. If they get away with taking over the town, it won't be a safe place to live. You can't let that happen."

Mark came to his feet and his face was grim when he answered. "I handled the town for two years and now they can get somebody else. I've walked these streets with my back a target for every two-bit gunman for as long as I want to. I've kept order and I've run a clean town, just like I told 'em I would, but I'm sick of it. Why should I chance my life when I don't need to? You think any of these people are my friends? You think any of 'em give a damn about me? They hate my guts and you know it. The whole town can go to hell as far as I'm concerned!"

He left the stunned Faro Neal and went into the hotel. Anger surged in Kirby's chest, anger that rose from a sense of guilt he could not quite shake. Climbing the stairs he went to his room where he stretched out on the bed to sleep.

At five o'clock, a knock on his door roused him from his light sleep. Slipping his gun from holster, he went to the door, removed the chair propped under the door handle and stepped back.

"Come in," he said, and lowered the gun when Tom Shields stepped through the door.

Shields was a square-built, serious-faced young man of twenty-four. He wore a small mustache, barely visible because of the lightness of his hair. A small rancher, he had taken the job as marshal because he needed the money, and because there was no one else. But he had wanted Mark to stay on and make him deputy. Both he and Mark knew he wasn't tough enough for the marshal job.

"I wanted to talk to you for a minute,"

Shields said to the other uneasily.

"All right—sit down." Mark wondered at the surliness of his own tone. He was acting like a spoiled kid, and didn't like it. Shields eased himself down onto a chair and sat twisting his hat in his big, work-roughened hands.

"It's like this, Mark. Gila and Pete Manson and Lace Taterell are saying they'll take over Comanche soon as you leave. That means a lot of people hurt, because you know Gila. He's crazy mean and there's no telling how far he'll go once he starts. Now, I agreed to take this job because they couldn't get anybody else, but I ain't a gunfighter, and I won't have much chance against those three. I hate to ask for help, and I wouldn't if it was just me, but the town needs it. I wish you'd stay."

"No!" Mark said explosively. "Everybody's come bellyaching to me now that it's time to leave. Before that, no one gave me the time of day, because I was a gunman, not much better than the outlaws they hired me to handle. But now that they're in trouble, they all expect me to protect them. It don't work that way. If you're scared of a cheap lobo like Gila, you shouldn't've taken the job."

TOM SHIELDS came swiftly to his feet and a bright flush of anger stained his face.

"I ain't scared of him! I wasn't asking for myself. It's the decent people of this town I was thinking about, the women and kids. I had to talk myself into coming up here and asking for help, but I'm sorry I did. You're as cold-blooded as everybody says you are." He left the room, almost running.

Mark stood there and cursed viciously. He lashed out with murderous rage and kicked the single chair spinning across the room. Then he jammed his hands deep into his pockets and stood at the window, staring down with unseeing eyes at the empty street.

Promptly at six, Hugo Dancer wheeled the stage up before the hotel and stopped

[*Turn page*]

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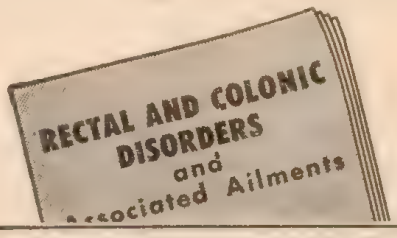

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with a squeal of brakes amid a huge cloud of dust. The hostler from the stable brought over fresh horses and began hitching them to the coach. A lone drummer dismounted stiffly from the stage and came into the hotel.

Mark Kirby took his bag down to the porch and the hostler threw it into the boot. Tom Shields came across the street from the marshal's office, walking stiffly, his face wooden. He accepted the star Mark held out to him and turned away at once.

Faro Neal came up and stopped before Mark, unsmiling. He held out his hand and Mark shook it briefly, knowing that Faro was badly disappointed in him.

"So long, feller—take care of yourself," Faro said, and went back to the saloon with his straight-backed walk.

That was all of it. Two long years in this town, doing its dirty work, and one man here to see him off, to wish him luck. His lips curled with contempt for the town and for the people in it.

Hugo Dancer came from the hotel, wiping his mustache with the back of his hand, his breath smelling of whisky. Hugo's rheumy old eyes swept the empty street with a careful knowledgeable look.

"Good time to be pulling out, Mark. Trouble's brewing."

"No concern of mine," Mark replied shortly. "Let's get going."

Hugo glanced at him in surprise, but immediately got up on the box. Mark climbed into the coach, Hugo cracked his whip, and the stage lurched ahead. They roared down the main street of Comanche and out over the wooden bridge and onto the prairie.

After fifteen long years, Mark Kirby was starting a new life. For the first time in all those years he could lean back and relax, never worrying about the troubles and passions of men, of playing one man off against another, of keeping a careful balance of power.

The rocking coach rolled away the miles, and Mark had a memory of Tom Shields's earnest face as he had asked for help. He again heard the accusation in Faro Neal's voice, and thought about what he was doing. He wasn't running away. There simply had come a time when it was best to quit. It had had to come some time, and the town had to learn to take care of itself.

Trouble was striking swiftly, but it always did. He had left other towns and they had survived. It was true that he hadn't left them until he'd thought the job was done, while in Comanche it had not been done.

Maybe he hadn't needed to tramp on Gila Thompson so hard. Maybe Faro had been right about that. Thinking of it now, he wondered if he had been secretly hoping this would happen, that the town would be made to realize how important he had been to them.

The thought bothered him and he tried to shut it out, but it kept returning. He saw Tom Shields's face again and realized that the young rancher had been scared. But just the same, he knew Shields would be out in the street to face Gila Thompson.

For the first time, Mark saw that he had selfishly piled trouble on Tom Shields, who didn't deserve it. It wasn't Shields he was sore at. Faro Neal *had* been right. He, Mark Kirby, had let false pride force him into an act unworthy of a man.

When finally the stage rolled into the yard of the Bar U Ranch, Mark stepped down from the coach and headed for the corral. There was a saddle on the top pole and he took down the rope, roped out a mount, saddled, and stepped up. Riding back to the house, he pulled in before Hugo Dancer and Bill Edwards, the Bar U owner. "I'll return the horse tomorrow, Bill," he said.

"I was kind of hoping you'd change your mind, Mark," Hugo said, grinning. "Good luck."

Mark nodded and rode at once from the yard, bound back for Comanche.

He rode hard, knowing it was going to be a close thing. Gila and his partners would wait for dark, but not much beyond that. And now, for the first time today, Mark felt fine.

He heard the firing when he was a mile

from town, and put the horse forward at a hard run. Coldness settled in his belly and he listened for the shooting to stop, for that would signal the death of Tom Shields. He cursed himself for a fool, but when he turned in at the back of the buildings that fronted on Main, the firing was still going strong.

Swinging down, Kirby tried to figure it. There seemed to be two guns firing from his left, and three from his right. The three would be Gila and Pate Manson and Lace Tatrell. Deciding that, he immediately cut to his right on the run. When he figured he was behind the three, he cut down an alley and peered out on Main from the protecting corner of Flagg's Emporium.

From occasional gunflashes, he was able to spot the positions of all the men in the gun battle. Someone was with Tom Shields. The new marshal was standing in the angle of the buildings where the saddle shop jutted out two feet past the jail office. Someone across the street stood in the alleyway between the Buffalo Gal and the newspaper office.

Gila was holed up across the street between two buildings, and another man was with him. The other outlaw crouched at the base of the hotel's porch.

Mark lifted his gun and called, "You by the hotel, drop that gun!"

The man twisted and fired all in one quick motion, the bullet slamming into the wall behind Mark.

Mark dropped the hammer of his gun and felt the weapon kick back in his hand. He saw Pete Manson drop to his knees, stay there a second, then sprawl loosely forward on his face, dead. From across the street, there was a shout of surprise.

Then Mark himself was shouting, "Gila, this is Mark Kirby! You and Taterell throw down your guns and march this way. The party's over."

"Come and get me, Kirby! I said we was taking over the town, and we are!"

"Deal me out!" Lace Taterell called. The tall, skinny outlaw stepped out into the open, his gun gone, his hands held

[*Turn page*]

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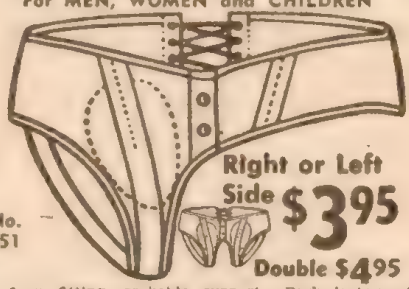

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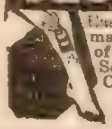

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high. "I don't want any part of it, Kirby."

"You yellow-bellied skunk!" Gila yelled, and in shocked horror, Mark saw the killer's gunflash light the dark street.

LACE TATERELL screamed, fell to the dust, and lay there, his legs thrashing wildly before he died.

"You don't back out on me!" Gila yelled defiantly.

"Up to now, you had a chance to surrender, killer, but now I'm going to get you!" Mark told him. "You had no call to shoot your pal down from behind."

"We'll cover you!" Tom Shields shouted, and at once he and the other man set up a steady firing on Gila's position.

Under cover of that fire, Mark dashed across the street. Gila saw him, but didn't dare expose himself to a shot. The gunman's own snap-shot went wild.

Gila knew Mark was closing in on him, and the knowledge played on his thinned nerves. He stood it for fifteen seconds, then stepped out to face Mark across twenty feet of board walk.

Gila fired at once, not aiming, and the slug breathed past Mark's head. The lawman's gun bucked in his fist as he thumbed off three shots. The big slugs tore through Gila Thompson and he staggered forward until he hit a tie-rack, then went down in a broken fall.

Two men were coming up the street toward Mark, both grinning. Tom Shields and Faro Neal. Mark looked at the saloonkeeper in surprise.

"What are you doing out here?"

"He figured I needed some help," Tom Shields said, his grin wider.

"I thought you were going ranching, Mark," Faro said.

"I changed my mind," Kirby replied. "I'm too young to quit yet. It seems to me the drinks should be on the house tonight."

"Under the circumstances, I agree," Faro said gravely.

Together the three men walked across the silent street to the Buffalo Gal.

THE KILLER • • • • • • *(Continued from page 102)*

patron was himself, pestering one about the clothes he choose to wear.

He glanced back at the body. The head was rolling with the slight lurching of the wagon. Such trouble did one like this cause! In years past a dead man was put into a hole and forgotten, not conducted to town like one going to a fiesta. The stooped shoulders rose and fell whimsically.

He thought, Well, this is the way now, *viejo,* for the times are new. You cannot live in the past.

Aie-e-e, but the sun made one's old bones feel young and strong! When he delivered this load of manure, he would walk through the town and wink and smile at the pretty girls. He gave voice to an old love song:

> ***"Come into my embrace***
> ***My pretty dove,***
> ***And lift your lips***
> ***To mine."***

A sound came from behind him. He did not turn immediately, but stared with wide, frightened eyes over the ears of the horses, seeing the rock-strewn road that lay ahead. Had it been a groan he had heard? Or was it an evil spirt sobbing with sorrow that it must leave its abode in Laster's heart?

He turned then, slowly. Laster was staring at him, and the eyes were not those of a dead man. The lips moved.

"Water," they said.

Juan stoped the horses.

"You are dead," he said firmly.

Laster shook his head weakly.

"Get me some water." There was no mistaking the lively arrogance in that hated voice, weak though it was.

Juan chucked up the horses and turned them to where a circle of willows marked a pond. He climbed down stiffly and brought cupped handfuls of water until Laster shook his head that he had enough.

"Let me rest awhile," Laster said. "This jolting is enough to drive a man crazy. Later, you can take me to the doctor. I'm bad shot, but I won't die. I've got a score to set-

tle with Mayes."

His voice shaky but vehement, Laster continued to boast how he would kill Mayes and ride off with his wife. Juan's eyes were sad as he climbed back onto the wagon seat and sat facing the man. He reached up and snapped off a thin willow branch to occupy his fingers. It was bad, very bad, that the trouble was not gone from the patron's life. His bullet had failed—Oh! ever so little—to touch the wicked heart of this man.

The willow switch twirled in his fingers as he stripped the bark from the slick, damp wood with a weathered thumbnail. He broke off the springy tip and pulled the loose splinters away. They left a fine point.

Juan sighed. The Señor Mayes, like all young men, was hasty. He had used only one bullet where his hatred should have demanded all that were in his gun. As a result this evil still lived. Truly, it often falls to the *viejo* to amend the impulsive, half-done work of the young. There must be peace in the patron's household.

LASTER'S eyes were staring as the old man knelt at his side. The gnarled brown fingers fumbled at his chest and lightly touched the bullet-hole in the flesh. The wounded man screamed then, and threw weak arms to pummel futilely at the leather-tough face that leaned over him. Then the hands dropped and lay still, and fresh blood poured from the wound.

Juan threw the stick into the pond and watched the pink stain spread around it. His eyes came back to Laster. There was only one bullet-hole, was there not? Who would know? He wiped his fingers on his tattered britches and moved back to the seat to take up the reins again.

Back on the road the sun soaked into his body, warming it. It had been cold, cold and evil, there in the shade of the trees. But here on the road to town with a man who is dead, *aie-e-e,* very dead, it is warm. Warmth is for the living.

The horses perked up their ears and a bird darted in frantic haste from a mesquite scrub as the cracked old voice arose in song.

"Come into my embrace
My pretty dove. . ."

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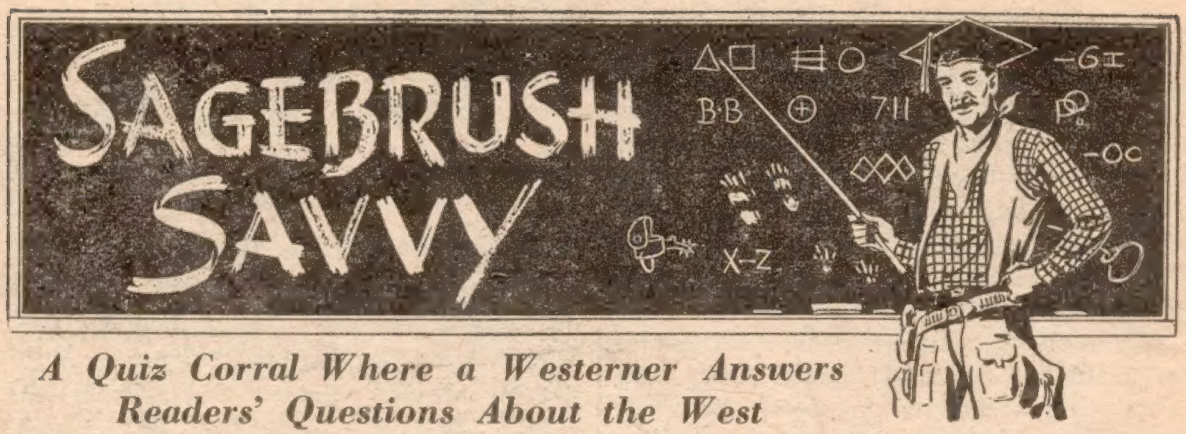

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

SEVERAL issues back I offered to turn the corral over to anyone who knew for sure which Red River is referred to in the old song "Red River Valley." Reader E. H. Dunbar of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, writes me that he is sure the song originated in the Red River Valley of the North, which heads in Minnesota and runs north into Canada. He says it was already an old song there in 1884, but that originally it was not a "cowboy" song. He says that as sung today—and called "The Cowboy's Love Song" one word has been changed: instead of "The cowboy who loved you so true," it was originally "The halfbreed who loved you so true."

Thanks, Mr. Dunbar. I have no reason to doubt your correctness, though I have always heard it sung as a cowboy ballad, doubtless adapted from the original, as many folk songs are.

Reader K. E. Hamilton of Denver, Colo. has sent me still another version of the words, too long to quote in full here, but beginning:

"Get away from that horse's head before you
get the h—l kicked out of you,
And remember the Red River Valley and the
girl that has loved you so true!"

Mr. Hamilton says that the song was a favorite of Lucille Mulhall, "a warbler of the mockingbird kind" and famous cowgirl with the old 101 Ranch outfit. Further comment on this old ballad will be welcome.

Q.—I have noticed the word *cibolero* in several western stories. What does it mean?—L.M. (Kans.).

A.—*Cibolero* (see-bo-LAY-ro) is Spanish for buffalo hunter, from *cíbolo* (SEE-bolo), buffalo.

Q.—Can a horse outrun a pronghorn antelope?—B.D. (Mich.).

A.—No.

Q.—Is there a school of any kind where I could learn to be a rodeo contestant?—Ted (N.Y.).

A.—Not that I know of. Many rodeo contestants have been ranch hands and have learned some horsemanship and skill with a rope in the course of western ranch work. Bronc riders, steer riders, and steer bulldoggers often begin by trying their luck in the smaller rodeos, often in some of the amateur, highschool, college or F.F.A. "kid" rodeos now very popular in the west. The best *ropers* are usually cowboys from the ranches.

Q.—Are easterners allowed to hunt deer and other big game in the western states?—S.W. (Conn.).

A.—The only requirement is to be an American citizen and buy a non-resident license in the state where you want to hunt. Non-resident licenses are usually pretty expensive. In my own state of New Mexico, for instance, the non-resident fee for hunting big game (deer, turkey, and bear) is $50.25, while residents pay only $4.00. In some states there are special fees for drawn-by-lot permits to kill elk, antelope, bighorn, or other not so numerous big game. Any state game department will be glad to give full information on request.

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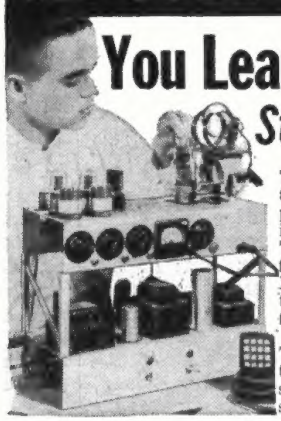

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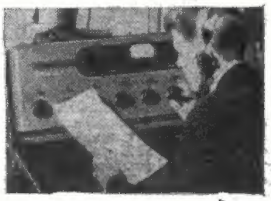
An important benefit of NRI Radio-Television training is that you can start to cash in fast. Many men I train start soon to make $10, $15 a week extra in spare time fixing neighbors' sets. Multi-tester built with parts I send helps locate and correct set troubles. Read below at left how you build actual equipment that gives you practical experience, brings to life what you learn from my lessons.



MAIL POSTAGE-FREE CARD TODAY Find out about this tested way to better pay Fill out and mail the card below for actual lesson and 64-page book, BOTH FREE. J E. SMITH, Pres., National Radio Institute, Dept. **4MQ**, Washington 9, D.C. Our 40th Year

SEE OTHER SIDE

Practice BROADCASTING

As part of my Communications Course I send you kits of parts to build the low power Broadcasting Transmitter shown above, and other equipment. You use it to get practical experience, to perform procedures required of broadcasting station operators. An FCC Commercial Operator's license can be your ticket to a better job. All equipment yours to keep.

Practice SERVICING

You use kits of parts I send as part of my Servicing Course to build many circuits common to both Radio and Television. You build a modern Radio Receiver, an Electronic Multitester, many other pieces of equipment. NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING.

Available to **VETERANS** Under GI Bills

FIRST CLASS
Permit No. 20-R
(Sec. 34.9 P.L.&R.)
Washington, D.C.

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NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE
16th and U STREETS, N.W.
WASHINGTON 9, D. C.

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY JOBS IN RADIO-TELEVISION

J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man. OUR 40th YEAR.

Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay-Security-Bright Future

Do you want a good pay job, a bright future, security? Or your own profitable business? Then get into the fast-growing RADIO-TELEVISION industry. Keep your job while training at home. Thousands I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience, many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from my easy to understand, illustrated lessons; get practical experience on actual equipment I furnish.

My Training Leads to Jobs Like These

BROADCASTING: Chief Technician, Chief Operator, Power Monitor, Recording Operator, Remote Control Operator. SERVICING: Home and Auto Radios, Television Receivers, FM Radios, P.A. Systems. IN RADIO PLANTS: Design Assistant, Technician, Tester, Serviceman, Service Manager. SHIP AND HARBOR RADIO: Chief Operator, Radio-Telephone Operator. GOVERNMENT RADIO: Operator in Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Forestry Service Dispatcher, Airways Radio Operator. AVIATION RADIO: Transmitter Technician, Receiver Technician, Airport Transmitter Operator. TELEVISION: Pick-up Operator, Television Technician. Send for lesson and book. Mail card below.

A Tested Way to Better Pay

Radio, even without Television, is bigger than ever. 115 million home and auto Radios create steady demand for service; 3000 Radio stations give interesting, good pay jobs to operators, technicians . . . provide good pay now, bright future later for men who qualify.

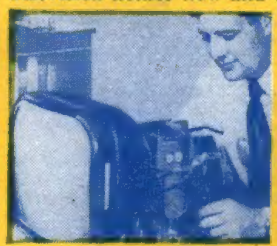
Men of Action Are Needed

Take NRI training for as little as $5 a month. Many NRI graduates make more in two weeks than the total cost of training. Mail card below today. J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept 4MQ, Washington 9, D. C. Our 40th YEAR.

SEE OTHER SIDE

Television Is Making Good Jobs—Prosperity

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 25,000,000 Television homes now and the total growing rapidly. 200 Television stations on the air and hundreds more under construction. Color Television is here. This means more operators, installation and service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful career in Radio-Television. Mail the postage-free card today.



CUT OUT AND MAIL THIS CARD NOW

Sample Lesson & 64-Page Book

Both FREE

Act now! Send for my DOUBLE FREE OFFER. Card entitles you to Actual Lesson on Servicing, plus my 64-page book.

NO STAMP NEEDED—WE PAY POSTAGE

Mr. J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 4MQ
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-Page Book, "How to be a Success in Radio-Television." (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

NAME_____ AGE____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ ZONE____ STATE_____

VETS WRITE IN DATE OF DISCHARGE_____

I TRAINED THESE MEN FOR GOOD PAY JOBS

EARNS $10 TO $15 A WEEK EXTRA
"Started repairing Radios six months after enrolling. Earned $10 to $15 a week, spare time." ADAM KRAMLIK, Jr., Sumneytown, Pa.

IS TRANSMITTER-STUDIO OPERATOR
"Am transmitter-studio operator at KPAT. Most important day of my life was when I enrolled. ELMER FREWALT, Madison, S. Dakota.

HANDLES TOUGH JOBS
"Am employed as Technician for a TV Clinic, handling the tough jobs that cannot be fixed in the home." BERNARD SIERS, Cleveland, Ohio.

HAS OWN BUSINESS
"I've come a long way in Radio and TV since graduating. Have my own business on Main Street." JOE TRAVERS, Asbury Park, New Jersey.